

# on spec

the canadian magazine of the fantastic

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John Bowker  
Corrine de Winter  
Derek Künsken  
Robert Lake  
Stephen Leclerc

Alexander Polkki  
Ernie Reimer  
Mark Shainblum  
Hugh A.D. Spencer  
Saint James Harris Wood  
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fall 2006 vol 18 no 3 #66

## fiction

Sticky Wonder Tales .....	Hugh A.D. Spencer .....	5
Tidal Maneuvers .....	Derek Künsken .....	18
Finish the Game .....	Stephen Leclerc .....	30
Vision Quest™ .....	Alexander Polkki .....	45
Spiked! .....	Saint James Harris Wood .....	51
Why Does the Freed Tiger Glare, If Indeed It Glares At All? .....	Robert Lake .....	62
Silicon Singularity .....	Ernie Reimer .....	70
And its Noise as the Noise in a Dream; And its Depth as the Roots of the Sea .....	Leah Bobet .....	85
A Bit of the True Material .....	John Bowker .....	96
The Art of Solitude® .....	Mark Shainblum .....	106

## poetry

The Restraining (Disorder) .....	Saint James Harris Wood .....	61
The Carving of Hours .....	Corrine de Winter .....	82

## nonfiction

Editorial: Thinking About the Past, Thinking About the Future .....	Derryl Murphy .....	3
About our contributors .....		126

## cover

“Rufus” © Richard Yot



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# Thinking About the Past, Thinking About the Future

Derryl Murphy, Fiction Editor

I've thought a lot about what I was going to write this time out, but I've tasted and rejected every potential topic. How many times will people want to read about the state of small press publications, or SF in the real world, or SF versus fantasy, or, or, or, or, *ad infinitum*? Frankly, if you don't see it here you're very likely to see it in another magazine, or floating around free range on the web. As a matter of fact, there's been a lot of online discussion lately (as of this writing) about the state of science fiction, and pointers to some of that discussion can be found on *On Spec*'s own blog.

So what the heck do I talk about?

I'm in my forties now, younger than most of the other On Speckians (and how's that for a cool word?), but no longer a spring chicken. I'm still able to play soccer regularly, but I suffer aching joints and hefty bruises after every game; my bladder won't let me sleep in any longer; foods that once treated me very well now conspire to add distance around my belly and weigh me down more than normal; and when I don't shave my head I have a bald spot and graying hair. Same old story, I know; how many of you reading this can say some of the same?

Happily, this won't degenerate into another commentary on the graying of fandom. I'll leave that particular complaint for others with more of a stake in that sort of thing.

I will, however, venture a short distance into the sorts of things that kids are reading, by virtue of having two boys, currently 10 and 7. And keep in mind that when I say "reading," I sometimes mean "being read to." As I dive into their bookshelves, preparing for a move, I see that we have a lot of the current crop of fantasies here, lorded over by Harry Potter and followed closely by Phillip Pullman, Jane Yolen, with a dollop

Editorial: Derryl Murphy 3



of Roy MacGregor's *Screech Owl* hockey mysteries to spice things up. We also have two of Julie Czerneda's YA fantasy anthologies, both because I happen to have written stories for them.

What we don't have a whole lot of is actual *science fiction* for kids. I see we do have John Christopher's *White Mountain* books, which I first discovered in grade five, and I've told my older son that we'll try to find some of the Heinlein juveniles for him to read. But current books that are actually SF instead of fantasy? Apparently nada.

That isn't to say that authors aren't producing the stuff. It is out there, although sometimes very hard to find. But some of what Bruce Coville writes would qualify as SF, and David Gerrold saw a need and jumped right in, and there are others.

Certainly the field isn't helped when organizations like our local public library classify Neal Stephenson's *Baroque Cycle* as YA. Yes, he has written science fiction. Yes, those books would appeal to SF geeks. No, just because it's SF doesn't mean it will only appeal to teens. Or even that it's appropriate for teens (or, perish the thought, children).

Books for beginning readers, and even picture books, are rarer yet. Even books that purport to involve science and invention seem to be heavily populated by ghosts and magic. What part of the chain is breaking here? Is it the writers, not producing actual science fiction that would be of interest to children? Is it the editors, who see a run on YA fantasy and decide that this is the only thing likely to make money? Is it the readers (or their parents, since that's usually where the money comes from), who have fallen into a rut and strive to recapture that magic in the most familiar way possible?

I don't, as you might imagine, have any real answers. If I did, of all places one would think that my house would be stocked with a variety of books that fit the bill I'm talking about. Yes, I write fantasy, but I almost always identify myself as a science fiction author.

There's nothing wrong with creating a new generation of fantasy readers. There's plenty of fantasy I read as a youngster, and plenty that I read now. But I'm ambiliterate, you might say, able to get as much enjoyment from one sub-genre as I do from another (and from plenty of other literary fields, I might add), and partly I think I can attribute that to exposure to SF as a child. I'd like to think that we, authors and editors and readers, can find a way to again make the future exciting for kids. •

"An unusual challenge for advancement." Which is boss-code for "this job is going to be so boring that it will fossilize your brain or so dangerous that it will melt your gonads."

## Sticky Wonder Tales

Hugh A.D. Spencer

Hey Squiffy:

Sorry to hear about the bowel infection. Even sorrier to hear that it's one of the intelligent ones.

Just how intelligent do you think? If you've got one of stupider batches I've heard that you can sometimes pacify them by watching sitcoms from the 1960s and early 1970s. Not *Dick Van Dyke* or *Green Acres* because there's some hidden smart stuff and surrealism in some of those.

No, try the blandest thing imaginable—like the *Brady Bunch* or *The Partridge Family*. That ought to settle 'em down. No, scratch *The Partridge Family*, I hear it's a bit dangerous if the bugs go totally comatose.

Otherwise, how is the mutation coming along? Not too fast (because we'll miss you), I hope. Not too slow, either (because that would be boring).

Everything is such a question of fucking balance these days.

Cheers,

• • •

Andrew:

I agree with you on your last point. You have to keep on evolving but not so much so that they don't know where to send the bill for the

Hugh A.D. Spencer 5



Science Fiction Book of the Month Club.

Can you believe that such a quaint institution still exists?

Anyway, to answer your main question: the process seems to be moving along pretty well. The bacteriological route is uneven and kind of painful, but what can I say? The price was definitely right.

Maybe I should have gone the way you did and just gone the technological route.

Have they moved you on to any new simulators?

Best,

• • •

Hi Squiffer:

They put our whole team into the most advanced model of our oldest and most obsolete simulators. I think that's better than being assigned to the least advanced model of the middle-range systems. But you know what a dangerous optimist I can be.

I can be realistic, too. Which is why I know there's absolutely no way some guy from the suburbs of Steel Town is going to get hold of any exotic tech. At least not this fast.

Our trainer explained that could be some kind of an honour. "An unusual challenge for advancement." Which is boss-code for "this job is going to be so boring that it will fossilize your brain or so dangerous that it will melt your gonads."

Maybe both.

Anyway, the "unusual challenge" is trying out some Super Culture chatter that might be some technology teaching software. Of course, it could be random eruptions of interstellar gas. Our team gets to figure out which.

No problem, it only ought to take twenty, maybe thirty, years.

Even if it does turn out to be something meaningful, it doesn't necessarily follow that the information will be anything particularly important. It could be blue prints for the intergalactic equivalent of those little plastic tabs for bread bags.

Then again, it really might be some profound existential insight. Real meaning of life stuff. We're talking at least 80 million civilizations and a shit load of space and eternity.

Profoundly yours,

• • •



Andrew:

I had a great dream last night.

I was back in our old house in Saskatchewan. It was the dead of January; snow everywhere, about three in the morning. You know, one of those unbelievably black, bleak and frigid nights.

I really miss them sometimes.

Anyway, I turned away from the kitchen window for a second to take a sip of cocoa and when I look out again, there's this amazing shifting wall of aurora borealis everywhere. Along with the electrical crackling in THX sound and it's like high noon with an ultraviolet sun. Then the effect fades and it goes back to night again. But it's hardly black out there now. I'm looking at some planets—gas giants—floating over the snowdrifts. Five different variations of Jupiter out there—the multicoloured bands of gas take up over a third of the sky.

Which makes a striking contrast to the outline of the old Greek Orthodox Church on 105th Street.

*Un-fucking-believable...* as I believe the Bard once put it.

I suspect the dream was some kind of psychic compensation for my longstanding disappointment that we never got any *Big Ships*.

The dream also helped me not worry so much that I'd completely forgotten Annie's eighth birthday yesterday. I can understand how you can evolve beyond some old friendships, but forgetting about your kids? Another downside of this Process, I suppose.

Speaking of which, I've got to go now. The bacteria have reached a developmental phase that makes me extremely flatulent. I'm still connected enough to my family to notice that they dislike it if I don't deal with this problem in the bathroom.

Got to pass some gas on my way to the stars.

Bloatedly,

• • •

Squiffoid:

Sorry about your fart-attacks. Hope you got around to fixing the bathroom fan before all this started.

Are you still ticked about the lack of *Big Ships*? *Get over it, guy!*

Maybe what I'm about to tell will be a bit of a consolation. Probably not, because it's happening to me and not you, it's just likely to tick you off even more.

But what the hell, I'll tell you anyway. The software we're using to drive the simulators is indeed meaningful. It seems to be some kind of mission programme in a solar system that we've never heard of.

*Holy shit!* The graphics! The sounds! The motion commands!

Sweeping, swooping, blasting our way through multi-coloured rings of interstellar dust, crashing through the core of an exploding sun.

Hate to say it, but these shows make your Saskatchewan dream-scape sound pretty lame.

It's not quite a fleet of UFOs hiding behind the moon or Gort on the White House lawn, but I'm definitely living some kind of a classic sci-fi movie here.

Sorry, I know this must sound really insensitive. It's just that we're having so much fun here and I'm sure once Central Administration finds out that we've got something interesting here, they're bound to take it away from us.

With apologies,

• • •

Andrew:

Thank you. I really appreciate how you're trying to help me hang on to my basic humanity by annoying me as much as possible. It's almost working.

You helped me to remember that I really, really still want those Big Ships. I want to see them *personally*. I'd even settle for getting goofy sunburn like Richard Dreyfus in *Close Encounters*.

Any kind of Significant/Transcendent Experience would make me feel better about what's happening in my real life.

I'm becoming a serious asshole.

I'm pretty sure it's a side effect of the Process.

God, I hope this is a side effect of the Process.

I know all the books say you shouldn't use your emerging abilities without training and in particular you shouldn't do so with family and friends present. But these things creep up on a person.

At first it was small stuff, subconsciously implanting a desire in my oldest's mind to finish his homework and go look for a summer job. Then you start suggesting that broccoli is actually a Slurpee from 7-11. Eventually you're levitating your kids to bed at 9:00 p.m.

Harmless, right?

Not really.

Yesterday my youngest left all his Power Rangers stuff scattered all over the floor of the family room. It was bath night and I went in there looking for him.

What happened next was all my fault. I shouldn't have gone in there with just my bare feet.

Those action figures have a lot of pointy bits.

Well, my enhancements just snapped on and I melted all the toys in the basement.

Just like that.

The books do say that some "powerful affect-based manifestations are likely to occur", but I always figured that my advanced mental powers would be a very calm and cerebral thing. Think about it, the Process is supposed to come from some higher civilizations somewhere in the Galactic Core. I mean to me that implies thought, rationality, reason.

To me, it does not suggest that I would suddenly lose it and reduce the proceeds of the last three Christmases to smoldering pools of plastic.

Maybe my deduction was more of an assumption.

The next thing that happens is that my eight-year old is standing in the doorway. He saw the whole thing. You can imagine the water works that Pat and I had to deal with.

Could you imagine if Derek had actually been in the room when I did that?

*I could have melted him!*

The next time I go in for more prescriptions, I'm going to ask for more than something to deal with the flatulence.

Take care,

• • •

Squiff:

I don't know about those Big Ships but I'm pretty sure we're dealing with some damned *fast* ships here.

I'm still having a lot of fun. I seem to have mastered the speed and directional controls for whatever kind of vehicle this is supposed to be. Last week we got a memo from the Lab telling us that they *think* that were running training software for some kind of spacecraft.

Well, *duh!*

Then they went on to tell us not to be alarmed if the instruments



on our consoles started to change. The alien software is making some suggestions to our sim hardware.

That is just so cool.

Do you remember that old MG roadster that I fixed up for your old girlfriend? The red thing that had the running boards?

It was a loud and beautiful pig of a machine and if you stroked it right and said nice things it would do anything for you. (A lot like your old girlfriend as I recall.)

Whatever craft we're simulating is a lot like that old MG. Except that it's capable of moving faster than light and I think it can travel through time. Which means that if you steer it just right, the chronometers will tell you that you've arrived before you left.

This is so much fun that I really don't mind that I'm not flying the real thing.

I've never loved a job this much. I really am the happiest when I'm in the motion capsule tugging at the control-tendrils and scoping out all the 3D imaging.

Do you remember Sue's youngest and how he was with his old Nintendo system? How he would bang away at the controller for hours on end? Silly kid used to cry and scream like they'd just pulled his teeth out if he couldn't move up to the next level. And when he did finally beat the game it was like he'd just found out that he was a junkie just won a lifetime supply of morphine from the Lottery.

I told the kid that the cube was just a simple computer and what happened in the game was really just how you were interacting with the game programmes.

"No way!" The kid yelled at me. "It's all about how *good* you are, *how much you believe in the game!* The game knows if you're trying your best and it rewards you."

That really creeped me out. The only thing that was creepier was the way the kid started laying in the dark all day in his room. Waiting for the time when Sue finally gave up and said he could play some more.

You were at school so you probably don't remember how Sue had a yard sale a few months later and the game system mysteriously disappeared. The two weeks of withdrawal symptoms were a bit rough but I hear the kid turned out okay eventually.

I'm a bit like that kid these days. I lay around my room waiting

for the next sim-run. What's really creepy is the fact that I love that part too.

Shivering and sweating here,

• • •

Andrew:

I got some new medicine and I'm feeling better.

The Process continues.

I can now see lower frequency sound waves and I don't need solid food any more. This makes grocery shopping a little more complicated but the family hasn't complained too much.

At least there's enough of my original physiology operating that the Prozac-like capsules I'm taking still work. There are no more outbursts of domestic telekinesis or spontaneous combustion. But I'm still obsessing about how everyone managed to miss first contact.

First contact.

Remember when people used to capitalize those letters? Seems rather silly now.

I agree with those sociologists who finally decided that we all just "kind of noticed" that alien concepts and information were seeping into the collective (un)consciousness of the human race.

I also remember an interview with that Carl Sagan wannabe who said that that this had probably been happening for quite some time but only recently had the phenomena reached the "cosmological tipping point" where we could now expect an "exponential increase in these intellectual manifestations."

Billions and billions of weird new ideas, all raining down on us.

Fuck, that was pretty good television.

I remember the interview because I felt so sorry for that astronomer and all his buddies. They'd had all those antennae stretched out all over the planet and the aliens weren't using radio signals to communicate with us.

They weren't even trying to communicate with us.

"The Vgotsky Effect" is what they eventually called it. I looked it up on the Internet if you actually care.

God, I'm ranting about nothing here. Must be the pills.

Anyway, we discovered that we were picking up the alien civiliza-

tions through “sublingual mental processes”. Which apparently is the only way that information can be conveyed on a faster than light basis. Which is pretty handy if you're running a vast Galactic Super-Culture. (Ah, more obsolete capitalization.)

When I was younger I used to think all of this was pretty monumental stuff. Why doesn't anybody care about this kind of thing anymore?

Maybe it's like computers. You probably don't remember how exotic and exciting they used to be. Then we all got one, then we all had to start using them—so computers went from being a part of the Amazing World of the Future to yet another boring thing in everybody's pain-in-the-ass job.

So what's the outcome, I write in my drug-addled state.

Well, we are a very practical people. If alien concepts are seeping into our minds then the best thing to do is to try and put them to some kind of commercial use.

In addition to the pills, I've been drinking quite a bit lately. Therefore, I'm pretty drunk right now. I'm sitting out on the porch and my youngest is next to me building towers with Lego. Cost quite a bit to replace.

I'm trying to get some fresh air to help the bacteria breathe. The little buggers have penetrated the walls of my stomach and now there're rows and rows of little flesh valves in my gut struggling hard to suck and push the air.

Isn't that a great conversation starter for my neighbors as they walk their dogs past the house? My youngest doesn't seem to notice, bless him.

It's about five in the afternoon and the fact that I look so bloody horrific is one reason that I'm knocking back gin and cream soda so early in the day. Another reason is that I'm not sure how much longer my body will let me get drunk.

Now, how unfair is that?

Sorry about all the tedious free association, it won't happen again.

The next time I write I'll be a genetically evolved super-being with the capacity for more coherent communication.

Toodles,

• • •



S—

Toodles?

Breathing through your gut? Are your abs just a big balloon now? Did you do all those sit-ups for nothing?

Sorry, guess I shouldn't make fun; it's just that I've had a hell of a week. Not exactly bad, just very different from what I was expecting. And since I spend most of my days exploring a simulation of the outer fringes of an unknown quadrant of the galaxy, that's saying quite a lot.

Things were going great until Wednesday. Just coming up on noon. Middle of the week, middle of the workday. Good time for something extreme.

I was steering out of a really complex five-sun solar system with 18 gas giants, when I noticed that I couldn't let go of the direction controls.

It felt like the skin on my fingertips had fused into the hardware. Did I mention that something had happened to the console? No, well, now it looked a lot softer and it was throbbing.

That just didn't seem right. I was still on a high from my hot piloting, so while I was interested at the intellectual level, I was more than willing to carry on with the mission profile.

*"What the fuck is going on?!"*

That was what the shift controller was screaming. Which, I guess was a good thing. I mean it was nice that somebody out there was actually paying attention.

Anyway, the controller hits the master switch and shuts down all the sims. So I'm sitting there waiting for the techs to show up and unscrew me from the capsule. Meanwhile I sit there and watch the console kind of sigh and shudder, like somebody had just let all the air out of the electronics. (Yeah, I know that makes no sense!)

Then I pulled my hands away from the controls and saw the gooey pink tendrils that linked the insides of my fingertips with the wiring of the sim's hardware.

Definitely one of those Cronenbergian Moments.

What was even stranger was the fact that while this hurt like ten simultaneous root canals, it also felt quite wonderful. Hard to explain, really.

So they used some tiny lasers to cauterize the tendrils and wheeled us off to the medicos. Once we got there they jammed sensor probes

up every orifice you can image and put us on 24/7 monitoring.

So I lay there with a wire up my ass until Sunday. The good news is that they say we get to go back to the sims tomorrow.

Toodles to you, too...

• • •

Andrew:

I guess this is a big week for transformations.

My skin has wrinkled up, turned green and my eyes are all puffy and yellow. I look like one of the Incredible Intergalactic Turtle People.

Maybe that's not a joke. Maybe I really am one of the intergalactic turtle people.

Hard to say these days.

My doctor says that my Evolutionary Transformation Process has pretty much spiked and very soon I'll be comfortable with all super-human abilities.

I don't know what qualifies him to make a statement like that but I actually think he's right. Every time I have a bowel movement I spontaneously factor quadratic equations while experiencing powerful flashbacks of the last time my neighbors had sex.

Which I'm sure will come in handy in the office environment at some point in time.

Best,

• • •

Stephen:

I received my official briefing today. Here's the short version:

The software we've been running in our simulators is turning me into an alien organism. Not just me, the whole team on my shift.

You can imagine, as I watched the new tendrils slither out of my fingertips, what a big surprise that was.

Gosh, doctor, I said (the gill slits in my cheeks made my voice really wet and sloppy), I thought it was just a case of the flu.

No, they aren't that stupid. There must be some legal reason they gave me the news in this way. Sure enough, the medico opens up my file and takes out a document that I must have signed when I accepted the job.

"It's important for you to understand that, even though this is an unexpected development", the guy says, "You gave us full consent at the outset of the project."

That's an interesting medical opinion.

The chair in this office is making what passes for my ass these days really uncomfortable. All terrestrial furniture is bad these days. I only feel good inside the sim. I really don't care what the Company doctor is telling me. All I want to do is get back to my mission runs.

"We're shutting down the project," the doctor says. "We're just not sure what directions these transformations are taking,"

Shutting it down? No runs?

Shit. Shit, shit *and* shit.

The doctor peers at some notes. He sounds a little uncertain because this communication was written by people who went to different schools.

"Apparently the missions you've been training for seem to be for some part of the galaxy that we're not likely to access for another two or three millennia."

I should have said something at that point. Raised some objection. But I didn't.

Maybe my mutant lisp was making me feel self-conscious.

"We just don't see any practical applications."

Bullshit. They just don't feel like spending any more money.

At that point, I do remember standing up really fast. Then I remember the flash of the doctor's needle and the last thing I remember was noticing how quickly the floor was approaching my face.

The tranquilizer must have worked very fast. Guess my physiology hadn't changed that much.

Take care,

• • •

Andrew:

Sounds like we had some very similar days.

At least as far as needles and the lecture on "informed consent" were concerned. They have a better case with me. Unbelievable as it sounds to me now, I actually signed up for all this nonsense.

They called me up from my cubicle, on yes, a *Wednesday*.

I was doing lateral data matches from different Company divisions and I was doing some good work. I didn't appreciate the interruption.



It's hard to get back on track when you're on a good telepathic roll.

Elwood was waiting for me. He was waiting in an office with a window.

Big domed forehead, brain the size of twelve supercomputers, bulging purple bloodshot eyes. As I recall, Elwood had those ugly eyes before he underwent the Process.

I never liked Elwood. I didn't like Elwood when he was an intern in human resources, I didn't like him when he had xeno-plasmic goo oozing from his ears and nose, and I didn't like him on that particular Wednesday.

Even though he was a highly successful super-being.

It's interesting to discover what changes in a person and what doesn't.

"Stephen," Elwood spoke very quietly, very carefully. "We've been accessing your Actualization."

Yeah, tell me something that wasn't completely obvious, you ultra-crained moron, I thought.

Then I briefly wondered if empathic telepathy was one of Elwood's evolved skills. Oh, well, he might as well know the truth.

"We feel that the synergy between your potencialized self and our corporate objectives...

This was not going to be good.

"...isn't yielding the sorts of benefits we had hoped for."

Like you, maybe I should have said something. I could have tried to argue this point. Maybe I wasn't as smart as Elwood but my task-functional I.Q. was probably pushing 350 and I had been charted as a much more creative thinker than he'd ever be. So what, if I had slimy gray skin, a perpetually running "nose", and breathing pores up the sides of my body that emitted gases that made me smell like a dead raccoon most of the time.

Small price for progress, right? I was one of the courageous few who had accepted the challenge of the (apparently) slimy, sticky and smelly space beings.

None of these revelations were going to help with my discussion with Elwood. Alas, he was the one with the astonishingly advanced bean-counting abilities. If I had dropped .00015% below some arbitrary performance criteria, I'm sure that chrome-dome here would know all the math behind it.

"We're going to have to terminate, Stephen."

Could be worse, I thought. With all my brainpower and creative genius I could go freelance. Become an amazingly irritating and rich consultant.

Then it was my turn to get a piece of paper. It was something that I'd signed back when I was a lot dumber.

"You do understand that because we paid the costs for your intellectual improvements, we can't allow anyone else to profit from them."

It just got worse.

Here's an interesting historical factoid: do you know that they will use the same substance to burn out my mutagenic agents that they used to treat venereal disease? I mean before they discovered penicillin.

Mercury.

That's right, they're going to inject me with heavy doses of brain killing, blood poisoning mercury. It will definitely sharply reduce my intelligence, it might make me go blind, but at least it won't kill me. Which, by the way, was the other option that Elwood mentioned.

I can even go home eventually. I wonder if there'll be anybody there waiting for me?

Maybe they've already started with doses in my food. I feel stupider these days. I'm watching a lot more sports on TV.

They say that eventually I'll get to come and visit you at Fort Fuck-Up. Did you know that's what they call the containment facility for Unplanned Evolutionary Manifestations? Okay, at least my vocabulary isn't shot yet. And do you notice that we definitely capitalize those words?

We'll make quite a pair on visiting day. I'll never be so far gone that I won't be happy to see my baby brother.

You can tell me about the wonders of the universe and how you dreamt of visiting all those fantastic civilizations that drift beyond the stars.

And I'll just be wondering what stars are.

Love,

•

"The only problem is that our fields," he said, stroking a claw along the bud, preening, "don't work under the sea. If we fell in the sea, we'd fall to pieces."

# Tidal Maneuvers

Derek Künsken

The inky world had survived the supernova only by shedding its crust and mantle to the explosion. Bathed by beams of radio and microwaves, the heavy planet streaked around the dead star in a tight, elliptical orbit, merging their magnetic fields in clouds of plasma. Oceans of metal carbonyls pooled on the surface, licking at spiny islands of steel.

Pik's eight claws of iron and nickel maneuvered over rods emerging from reddish seas. Rows of vertical needles, each higher than the last, were packed tightly behind him, the points forming a slope running to the peak of the island. Pik lived nowhere near the summit. He defended an arid, unsafe territory that squatted beside the impatient sea.

He had once been father to many buds and children, but they were all gone. A single fresh bud, a tiny replica of Pik, now grew beneath his fourth limb. The eight miniature legs of interlaced steel hung in the weak magnetic field from a thorax of woven metal fibers. Particles of gold, too small to see, but large enough to smell, studded the limbs. Little pincers capped each leg, tiny shells of iron and nickel, filled with arrays of parallel needles that slid against each other to open and close the claws. Four tiny eyestalks protruded from a knot of spines on the head.



Pik swiveled his stare from his bud to the sea, knowing that neither he, nor his bud, would survive the next tide. He hardened his magnetic field so that the bud would not smell his mood, but he doubted it worked. The bud was clever and sensitive.

Pik clawed closer to the sea to distract the bud with a lesson. With his large claw, Pik snapped a quill from the bushes of them covering his body. He held it over the long red waves, dipping the end into the sea. When he withdrew it, the tip had vanished. He duplicated the demonstrations again and again. Each dipping dissolved a little more until only a nub remained. He showed this to his child, letting him touch it, smell it with his magnetic field.

Pik clipped one of the forest of shiny needles around them with his great claw. It vibrated stiffly as he lowered it into the sea. It remained whole each time he dipped it. Tapping it free of the carbonyl droplets, he showed it to his bud.

"Can you feel the difference?" he asked. "This is a plant. It can't move, because it's all one piece. But you and me, we're animals. We're made of many parts held together by our fields. Plants and animals are made of the same things, but we're made differently. The only problem is that our fields," he said, stroking a claw along the bud, preening, "don't work under the sea. If we fell in the sea, we'd fall to pieces."

The bud stared at the sea in the strobing radio and microwaves of the pulsar, but Pik doubted he understood. Pik shifted his magnetic field comfortingly. Important lessons needed repetition.

Pik extended his legs and spread his spines. The bud imitated him, opening like a ball of thorns to catch sight of the flickering pulsar. Their needles caught the microwaves, converting them into electricity. The particles of gold studding their limbs heated under the radio waves, slowly dissociating the nutrients they'd collected, releasing carbon monoxide and leaving a new layer of plated steel.

Luckily, it began to snow. Pik and the bud hungered. Flakes of metal carbonyl fell in regimented columns from sky out of sight. Each column of snow ended at a needle, stacking at the tip or clinging magnetically along the edges. Where Pik and other members of the colony basked, they collected the snow on the ends of their spines and smoothed it onto the shabby, tired parts of their bodies.

From the left, one of Pik's brothers approached, pretending not to challenge. Pik pretended not to take offense. Ket was an old friend,

of a size and age with Pik. He stood on eight shiny legs, although his eyes and upper needles were powdering. Unlike the brothers near the center of the island, Ket and Pik lived a tragic, coastal existence. The next tide would probably kill both of them.

"Good morning, Pik," Ket said, brandishing his large claw. "How are the buds?"

"I have only one right now," Pik answered, menacing with his own claw. "The tide took my last." Pik saw three tiny buds hanging under his friend's thorax.

They measured each other. Their panic and excitement shivered their magnetic fields, deepening their musk. They listened to each metal hair move, predicting movements, guessing strength and endurance.

"Are you looking for new land?" Pik asked. He smelled the desperation, but didn't know if it was Ket's or his. Ket's four straight eyestalks quivered.

"Yes," Ket answered, dropping his claw forward. Pik yawned his big claw wide. The two hollow shells were threatening, filled with rows of shiny parallel fibers, muscles shaped and controlled by his magnetic field.

"I think the next tide will be bad," Ket said, watching Pik. Ket's claw was bigger, sharper, despite the powdering. "Most places along the coast will be submerged, except for maybe yours."

Pik scuttled forward along the plain of needles, nearing his great claw to Ket's. The rapid clicking of Pik's minor claws heightened Ket's pungent anxiety.

"I don't know about the tide, but the bud and I will need this spot," Pik said. "He's very young and will powder without sun."

Pik's eyestalks straightened. Ket trembled forward, touching their claws. They waited for many flickers, their acrid magnetic fields mixing, an intimate prelude to battle or surrender. Finally, Ket retreated, his seven smaller legs skittering him backwards. "Best wishes, Pik," he said, letting his big claw close as he withdrew.

"Take care of those buds," Pik replied.

Pik closed his claw only when etiquette and distance allowed. He still trembled, nearly exhausted. Higher on the island, on the second and third tiers, larger brothers sunned themselves and their buds on wider lands. They would kill any brother who tried to make their way

up the hill. Across a convulsing, deadly strait, lay a miniscule, uninhabited island, growing in the falling snow. Pik swung his eyestalks simultaneously at his bud, the deadly sea, the lonely island, and the more powerful brothers up the hill. Pik decided that his bud would not die here at tide.

• • •

The snow drifted downward instead of falling by the time Pik had completed the outer square of the wing and its guide wires. He modeled it on bird wings he'd seen: elegant square meshes of steel filaments that caught the increasing static of the world at tide. What he had was nothing yet. A hollow frame of flexible iron and nickel fibers lay in his claws. Pik and his bud were more powdery than before. He'd used many resources on a wing that would take more before it was done.

The last tide, the one that had consumed the last of his detached children, had planted the idea of flying. He'd just leapt to avoid a wave and had glided for a long time before crashing into a confused pack of larger brothers. Pik took the unbalanced idea as a sign of desperation. He feared the death that waited for his last bud at tide. He would do anything to save him.

Pik was so intent that he didn't hear Lap's approach. Lap moved fluidly. He was strong. His lesser claws gripped the tops of the needle field without slipping. He towered over Pik with long legs and a symmetric brush of top-needles. Lap didn't open it in his huge claw, but swung it in display as he stopped.

"Happy day to you, Pik," Lap said. "What are you doing?"

Pik held his trembling claw wide before him. "I'm trying to make a wing," he said. "I think I understand how birds fly."

Lap's fourth eye stock curled in surprise.

"Truly? That's something! Do you think it will work?"

Pik aligned the pincers of his claw vertically, vertex pointed straight at Lap. Courtesy required this to be the last position before attack and Pik's legs bunched lower, the bud cowering against his thorax. Lap paused at this stiff resistance. Most brothers would have fled and Lap would have pursued.

"I don't know. I hope so."

"I need some more space," Lap said. "The colony crowds. I can't feed all my buds."

The pincers of Lap's great claw edged open, rows of fine needles sliding against one another within two sharp shells of steel. Pik's great claw steadied.

"I considered eating a few brothers closer to the sea; using their territory for grazing my buds," Lap said. "I saw you getting shabby and I figured I'd better get to you before someone else did."

"That's a good idea," Pik said. "You've got to get your buds ready for the tide."

Lap's eyes stood taller in assent and he took a step forward, claw high, ready to descend on any resistance. Pik's minor claws skittered him backwards, on a curving path parallel to the shore. The unfinished wires scraped over the needles and an edge dipped into the sea, dissolving. He clipped the half-made wires with a smaller claw. They fell onto horizontal cross-branches beneath a field of spines, laying silvery bright.

"This is very interesting, Pik. What made you think of trying it?" Lap asked. Lap's minor claws and attention took up the wire.

Pik darted forward. Courtesy didn't recommend the move, but neither did politeness forbid it. He crashed into Lap, his great claw clamping onto Lap's fragile wrist. Pik's tactic, to defend marginal land against a much larger opponent, was so unexpected that Lap fell speechless. Mortified by his brother's silence, Pik spoke.

"If I learn to fly, I will go to other islands."

Pik tightened his grip, but the rods of Lap's arm were numerous and resisted the pressure.

"You're clever," Lap answered. "I worried when I saw you getting shabbier, tide by tide, and especially when your buds died."

A snap of parting metal surprised them both and Lap's severed claw fell backwards. Pik felt nauseous, as if he were near to powdering all over. He'd never done such a violence to another, had never been so desperate that he'd had to, even during tide. He smelled Lap's wavering magnetic field, poisoning with confusion as he caught his severed, shining claw. Lap backed away. The pressure had dented Pik's great claw, but it still closed. Lap retreated toward his own territory higher up the island.

"Let me know how your wing turns out, Pik."

"Certainly. Good luck with the claw."

Pik settled slowly, dropping until he rested on the tops of the



spines. He didn't feel shiny at all and his magnetic field trembled. Snaking out a minor claw, he took up the remains of the threads, stripping the nutritious studs, spreading their chemical richness over his dents and scuffs.

The snow faltered and he shivered with starvation. He looked at the skeleton of his wing. He'd built less than half of what he guessed he would need to fly. It was beautiful, a shiny incomplete gauze.

The bud shivered, famished. Pik felt like he would weep powder for his poor bud.

In the distance, fitful brothers twitched and shifted. They lifted their legs, one by one, measuring the static charge, the acrid tension of the approach to their pulsar. The seas rose towards the nearing star and the wind battered ominous clouds. Yet this was nothing compared to tide, when lightning would burst from this world to strike at their star.

Pik's needles drooped. No space awaited him on the upper island. Too many brothers outweighed him this season. He'd not grown enough, nor grazed enough, nor won enough territory. All his buds but one lay in pieces on the bottom of the sea.

He shifted a claw from his half-wing to his bud. The tiny dependent magnetic field quivered too quietly. Pik twisted an eye below his body and watched the tiny bud. His heart broke and he stared at his stupid, unfinishable wing. Methodically, shamefully, he stripped the wing of nutrients, smearing them onto the legs and spines of his bud.

• • •

Pik foraged disconsolately through his territory, scraping the pellicle from the spines as he clawed his way over hillocks formed by needle tips. The sinking nervousness in his leg hairs grew.

On higher ground, he saw Lap grazing. He'd reattached the severed claw, but nursed it while smaller claws pasted nutrients over the new joint. Lap shone in the radio and microwave light of the pulsar.

Pik's lower eye, roving as it guided the front claws, froze over a jangle of vertical and horizontal needles. Two other eyes swung on their stocks to examine the clot. Pik found a bird clinging beneath the spines, just above the sea. Pik leaned his large claw into the space, until his thorax pressed against the needle tips. He felt the delicate magnetic field and closed his pincers. Chittering cries rewarded him.

Pulling it into the light of the microwaves, he unfolded the bird. He'd never seen this species up close. It was about half Pik's size, with six thin, starving legs composed of steel quills that slid magnetically against one another for movement. It had only two eyestalks, but from the bristles of the main body emerged four strong threads of iron and nickel, connecting the bird to the four corners of a square mesh; its wing. The wing unfurled and Pik admired it. It was breathtaking.

"Hello, little friend," Pik said, crushing its head with a minor claw. He laid the body on the rows of needle points, but protected the wing in four minor claws. Severing the head, he held it for his bud. The infant took it in all eight claws and began stripping the nutrients and smearing them haphazardly.

The bird already started powdering, its magnetic field fading. Pik snipped the wires connecting the wing near the bird's thorax. He lifted it free and it hung still in his claws as the wind blew through the mesh. He felt its lightness, its desire to lift itself from the static charge on the planet. It was more beautiful than a deserted mound of needles rising from the seas.

Pik took each wire, smeared nutrients on the ends and pressed them to his shoulders. Slowly and precisely, he flexed electrical charges through each connection, heating the areas to dissociate iron and nickel carbonyl grains so that new metal plated, shiny, but fragile. Like Lap's wrist.

• • •

Pik finished expanding the wing with a narrow concentric band around the mesh square. He'd just attached the wires to the new corners when the snow stilled, neither falling nor rising. Every brother, Pik included, felt the sudden panic and terror of tide. It was upon them and Pik felt his ability to speak, his capacity for courtesy, slowly drown in animal fear.

Flickers later, the snow began drifting upward, following the magnetic field lines it had traced downward. The brothers felt a lightness as the static charge of the islands repelled them. The buoyancy shivered in the hairs on their abdomens and backs and legs, in the tiniest resistance to settling claw on needle, and in the miniscule push when lifted. The bud started shivering and clicking.

"We're nearing the sun," Pik chittered. The bud felt Pik's horror and Pik felt his. Pik trembled, trying to calm himself. He lifted his fourth leg and the bud. "See the sun? It flickers and flashes and pulls the seas to it, and makes our magnetic fields tingle. The spores and seeds of snow start rising, repelled by the static of our world. That's why birds can fly. That's why we feel light. And this is why we'll fly to a better place where no one will threaten you."

The bud, lightly powdered, surged within his magnetic field and Pik felt a trickle of electricity. His child had sent him energy, sharing the little he had. Pik's eye stocks tangled in a frown. He ran a claw over the child, smoothing the irregularities in his field, calming him as he had his many failed buds.

Pik felt powdery. His belly was smooth, the last stored nutrients now part of the widened wing. No new snow would fall until tide finished. If Pik survived, it would be on the thin microwaves of the star.

The brothers were disquieted. Smaller ones like Pik faced the peak, waiting to rush their second and third tier brothers, hoping to make it through in the confusion. They waited. The vanguard of the mob rarely survived. Even some of the large brothers would be forced down by biggest and washed away by the sea. Desperation crept upon them.

Cot edged too close to the larger brothers, Pik thought. Cot's legs and thorax were dusty, his eye stocks and needles flagging. He had no surviving buds this season. The sea had always unnaturally fascinated Cot, a strange brother of Pik's age who often did dangerous things to draw attention to himself. Nevertheless, where others had already ended more conservative lives in accidents, Cot's carelessness lingered.

Don't go first, Pik thought. Let someone else go.

Cot ran. His claws clicked so quickly along the needles that it sounded like a high-pitched keening. Maybe he hoped for luck like the one Pik had enjoyed with Lap. Word of Pik's audacious attack had been the talk of the colony and Lap had been the butt of cheerful ribbing. Pik didn't think luck repeated itself.

Cot pumped his seven legs across the field of spines, his great claw before him. He ran directly at Sep, a medium-sized brother of the second tier. Pik didn't know Sep well. He came from the other side of the island, a generation older than Pik. Maybe Cot hoped to turn at the last flicker, giving Sep no time to strike. Sep's big claw snared Cot's head.

Pik's eyestalks crossed in a frown. It had happened so quickly, so early, that it had advantaged no one but Sep. Later, another first would try. Some of the brothers, Pik included, congratulated Sep as he huntered to consume his kill. Pik lacked the strength to be first, middle or last. The wing made him even clumsier, but he needed high ground to attempt his flight.



The waves maddened, forcing Pik up the island, like every other outer ring brother. No one advanced far enough to be first, but they all felt the pressure rise, the repulsive magnetic touch of the rest. Annoyed chitters colored the sound of the storm. Lap backed away with the whole middle ring, eye stocks scanning the largest brothers behind him, claw pointed at Pik before him.

Pik's wing confused the brothers. They gave him more room than his size warranted. Swiveling his small eye behind him, Pik watched the mounting waves and the disappearing lower shore. Too near the sea to fly, Pik was too weak to fight his way higher. The pulsar's microwaves hardened at tide, but sustained poorly.

Down the ring, two brothers met. The conversation waxed terse as claws spun. The line advanced and a large third tier brother attacked Lap from uphill. Rising, blowing snow blurred Pik's view. The combatants chittered and screamed, pretense of conversation dissolved, the primal fear of the tide driving them.

Pik moved to fill the gap where Lap had denied him, but the brothers on either side of him rushed in, stronger, shinier. Pik froze and they regarded each other as they each displayed their great claws. Beneath him, Pik watched a wave pass within a body length of the needle tops. Weak with hunger, Pik advanced, trying to speak, but panic drowned courtesy.

Pik felt the magnetic fields in the spines beneath him shift and waver as the sea licked and swallowed them over and over. The eye stocks of the two brothers ahead of him jerked and they ran uphill, straight into a wall of giant claws. Pik shot an eye behind him and saw a hill of sea bearing in. He chittered, running at the claws, all eight legs pumping. He dodged and spun over the plain of needle tops, jamming through a gap between the massed brothers. He plunged ahead



as the wave shredded Pik's former neighbors.

The panic of the run fell beneath the stifling hysteria of the brothers pressing around him. He suffocated; they all did. They weakened, dusting. They snapped and jabbed at each other without a hint of speech. Pik's eye stocks weaved, watching everyone at once. They moved as one towards the higher needles, surrounding Pik, all bigger, much bigger, than the brothers of his ring or even the next one in. And they tasted the weakness of his magnetic field.

He leapt. Straight up. The static repulsion of the island lifted him higher, with the rising snow, as his scavenged wing unfolded. His legs and claws wriggled as the space beneath him widened. He slowly turned, riding the static in a sloping fall. High, round waves loomed.

He spit electricity and charge at the wing, his legs spasming. One leg generated more electricity and he found himself turning in tightening circles as he swooped upwards. The island and the confusion of brothers sailed beneath his left and he became lost. The uninhabited island vanished. To his left lay his birth island, to his right and beneath, the red sea.

His eye stocks drooped and the shafts of his legs loosened. Over his fear, he felt powdery, exhausted, as he hadn't felt since infancy. He weaved in his glide, swerving one way and another as his legs sputtered and choked out their remaining reserves of charge. Far to his left, around the entirety of his island and the chopping bath of his brothers, lay the small island he'd watched for days.

He swooped shabbily, scavenging extra charge from his thorax to lift his wing above the island. He drifted towards his goal through ripping winds. Sea spray pierced his magnetic fields, making movement painful and sluggish. A rolling wave buried the tiny island. It appeared flickers later, scoured of nutrients. Pik glided over open sea. His uneven electrical control of the wing threw him skyward and tightly to the left. The uninhabited island swung far beneath him and he headed to sea again. Heating winds threw rising snow at his eyes.

Reaching up with his great claw, he clipped one of the four wires holding the wing to his shoulders. He plunged as the mesh spilled upward. Snow streaked at him from below as the island of shallow needles filled his vision. The bud keened in terror. Wheeling his legs in panic, wrenching the last charge from them, Pik curved his body, jutting his hind legs beneath him.

He hit.

His beautiful starving bud cried, still cradled and latched to his fourth leg. Pik swiveled his eye stocks, but another was missing. The remaining two quivered when they saw steel spines wedged into the gaps between the needles of his body. His hips hung painfully loose over the rolling sea, unencumbered by his last two legs. His thorax, a thick collection of parallel iron and nickel fibers, sliding over one another in his magnetic field to move his lower legs, now ended in an uneven stump, his magnetic field decaying.

He chittered to the bud, stroking him. Pik's magnetic field shivered and the child's throbbed, faltering. The child suffered, lacking food, fearing. This place was dangerous, only midway up the island. The center was neither far nor high. The unwanted territory Pik had just left dwarfed this whole island.

Clamping his claws onto the needles, he scraped his broken body up the impaling thorns. Bits of his sixth leg dropped as his magnetic fields sputtered. Easing himself free, he watched his sixth leg splash beneath him. He dragged himself forward with only four legs, the end of his thorax jarring on every needle. Waves approached.

A single, low pole stood at the center of the island. Under bruising winds, Pik scratched his way up, until his nose was even with the peak. The wind tore snow raggedly across magnetic field lines, obscuring the place of his birth. The sea swamped his island again, leaving him clinging to a lone pole, a claw width above the deadly wash. Cradling the bud in a single limb, he crooned as he separated it from his body.

"This is no time to be born, little bud, but you'll be safer here," he said, placing the child on the tip. He waited until the tiny claws found their way around the pole before he let the child shiver alone. He kept his arm beneath the bud, but let him cry his anguish.

Pik felt a tiny, sudden, non-magnetic tug beneath him and snapped his eyes downward. His body past his fourth leg had vanished, dissolved by the sea. Queasy, revolted, he hugged the pole tighter.

Then came the lightning. A bubbling, gurgling charge leapt from the islands, from the seas themselves, into the sky, electrifying the snow to incandescence. Into space the charge surged, exploding all the way to the surface of the pulsar itself. In its wake, the world burned and glowed. The metal carbonyls burst into carbon monoxide and solid iron and nickel that plated everywhere.

The upper layer of the seas boiled and the most tremendous wind howled from below, yawning and ripping at the world. Pik clung, bitten by the blasting, hungry hurricane and liquid rain that ravaged his magnetic fields. He held the bud tightly against the rod. The winds tore ferociously, blowing down to up. Pik shielded the bud tightly while the winds tried to tear him away.

Then, the winds flattened and softened, blowing left to right again.

The sea sounded far beneath them. Most of it had evaporated, thickening the atmosphere to a choking, palpable soup. In the emptied ocean basin, their island stood like a mountain of upright needles, in a valley of spines that stretched so far down that two eyes measured the distance with difficulty. His old island lay exposed by the boiled ocean, with only a narrow strait dividing the two.

"Look, little bud," Pik chittered hoarsely. "Look at how safe we are. Look all around, how far the sea sits. We're safe."

The quaking child regarded Pik dubiously as the parent sank down the pole with a scraping of steel on steel. When his claws touched the other spines, Pik hadn't even the strength to hold on. He lay quietly, perched unevenly on their tips. His needles puffed out to catch the smell of the pulsar's microwaves, to feed his starved and wavering magnetic field. The bud crawled down unceremoniously, nestling close to Pik's legs for warmth.

"You see, little bud? You've survived your first tide. We are injured and we are weak, but we live. And soon it will start to snow and we will feel better."

Punctuating his words, the grayish iron carbonyl snow began to fall, powdering the islands and their inhabitants with nutrients, beginning the slow refilling of the sea. •

"The Lord sure works in mysterious ways," she said, opening the box of donuts. "Chocolate dip?"

# Finish the Game

Stephen Leclerc

*I shall finish the game.*

Dean Campbell's hand trembled as he held the mysterious letter against the steering wheel. The Accord's air conditioning was at maximum but did little to alleviate his rising body temperature. Sweat coated his body, caking his T-Shirt to his back.

A car's horn blasted behind him and he looked up. The traffic light had turned green. Dean waved an apologetic hand as he pressed the gas pedal.

He turned left onto Parkdale Avenue, the ghosts of his childhood traveling alongside the car with him. He passed three blocks before noticing how much Haven's Ridge had attempted to change over the last decade. The corner store he rode his bike to for comic books was gone, replaced by a Sobey's grocery store. Mamma Veloce's, the restaurant with the best pepperoni pizza and coke floats, had been torn down, replaced by a generic Pizza Hut. Other corporate conglomerates had clawed their way into the tiny community—McDonald's, Taco Bell, and Blockbuster now occupied prime territory on the two-lane street.

A small tremor ran down Dean's spine, leaving a trail of gooseflesh in its wake. Haven's Ridge may have seemingly entered the twenty-first



century, but its facelift did little to shed the cloak of its haunted past. Or maybe the problem lay with Dean himself. Despite Dr. Stromberg's advice, perhaps he wasn't ready to confront his personal demons after all.

He pulled into a Tim Hortons parking lot and stepped out. Clouds swept across the sky, threatening to blot out the sun. The air was humid. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and made his way to the coffee shop's entrance, his sandals slapping the warm pavement.

"Dean? Dean Campbell? Is that really you?"

A young woman approached, wearing a short-sleeve blouse and navy skirt. Her skin was tanned, her auburn hair streaked blonde with highlights. She held a box of donuts in one hand and a rattling set of car keys in the other.

"The Lord sure works in mysterious ways," she said, opening the box of donuts. "Chocolate dip?"

"Uh, no thanks." His mind struggled with recognition. The way she stared at him, her crooked smile... it seemed all too familiar.

"You don't remember me, do you? How about Heather Stewart's sixth-grade party? I bet you remember that." She let out a distinctive, high-pitched giggle.

The laughter sent waves of memories crashing over him. He felt a warmth flow through his cheeks as he recalled his first kiss in Heather's basement. "Nancy Turnbull," he said. Even after all these years, her laugh still made him smile.

"Nancy Albright now."

"Excuse me?"

"The last name's Albright now. Henry and I got hitched after high school."

*Henry Albright.*

"Congratulations." Dean said, not even hearing his own voice. The mention of Henry's name had sent his thoughts reeling. But why?

There was a pause in their conversation as her almond eyes studied his face. He shifted uncomfortably and felt the heat rise to his face a second time. What was wrong with him? His crush on Nancy had last reared its head almost twenty years ago, but now seemed intent on making up for lost time. To his right, a group of young boys sped through the parking lot on mountain bikes, playing cards flapping in the spokes of their back tires.

"So, how long are you in town?"

He shrugged. "Not sure yet. Maybe a couple of days."

"Where are you staying? We've got a Holiday Inn now." She seemed genuinely excited.

"Actually, I've booked a room at one of the B&Bs just off the main strip."

"Angela's?"

"No. Saint Jacob's."

"Hey, I've got an idea." She placed the box of donuts and set of keys on the hood of his car and fumbled in her purse. "You should drop by for dinner tomorrow night." Her hand emerged with a crinkled piece of paper. Her fingers dove back in and came out with a chewed, lidless pen. Scribbling on it, she said, "Here's my number. I won't take no for an answer."

He folded the paper and stuffed it into one of the back pockets of his cargo shorts. "I'm not sure how busy I'll be—"

"Henry is going to be so excited. Well, I'm off to church. Shame on me—I haven't prayed yet today." She retrieved her keys and the box of melting donuts. "See you tomorrow."

Dean watched her leave before stepping through the shop's front door. The aroma of fresh donuts and coffee washed over him. His stomach rumbled; the rest of his body begged for a caffeine fix. He ordered a medium double-double, two honey-crullers, and sat down at one of the square tables.

The impact of Nancy's final words didn't hit him until he was seated. *I haven't prayed yet today.* The letter he'd received also mentioned praying. Had the letter's author known he would run into Nancy? The sheer thought seemed impossible.

A thump against one of the front windows caused him to jerk. Steaming coffee spilled over the cup's rim, landing across the back of his hand. Grimacing, he wiped off the searing liquid and looked up.

A vagrant wearing tattered clothes gawked at him through the pane of glass. A pockmarked beard was smeared across the man's haggard face; he smiled, exposing two missing front teeth.

Dean felt his own jaw drop as he recognized the face—Matt Simpson, one-time captain of the high-school hockey team. He'd lost the teeth in a bench-clearing brawl.

*I've been back for fifteen minutes and all the town loonies are coming out*

*of the woodwork.*

Matt lifted a scarred, twisted finger and tapped it against the window. Dean picked up his lunch and moved to a table further away. He faced the counter, keeping his back to the window. The last thing he needed now was trouble.

There was another thump on the glass and then the door to the coffee shop opened. Dean's heart began to race; he could feel the blood pumping in his ears. He turned his head slowly...

And saw a man enter with two boys. The boys, dressed in matching baseball uniforms, ran up to look through the display case.

Dean turned back to the storefront window. Matt Simpson was gone, leaving an unobstructed view of the parking lot. Thank the Lord, he thought, then smiled as he realized that's probably what Nancy would have said. He felt tempted to finish his coffee, get back into his car, and leave Haven's Ridge once and for all. But he was determined to follow Dr. Stromberg's advice.

It was time to slay his demons.

Twelve years of therapy still hadn't helped him cope with his best friend's murder. Two days after his eighteenth birthday, Scotty Noel had been stabbed fifteen times, his naked corpse left in the dumpster behind Sam's Delicatessen. To this date, the case remained unsolved.

With Dean's family splitting apart at the seams, his father skipping town and his mother slowly killing herself with her buddy Jack Daniels, Scotty had been his entire world in high school. As they often did, Dean's thoughts drifted to his friend's insatiable love of board games. In the breakthrough era of video games, Scotty still preferred his Monopoly and Scrabble to Super Mario Brothers or Legend of Zelda. Above all else, Scotty's favorite game was chess. The two of them played countless all-night tournaments, usually putting a rare Spider-Man comic book or valuable hockey card on the line.

Dean washed down the last of his donut and exited Tim Hortons. On the edge of the lot, looming maple trees cast their distorted shadows across his path.

He was reaching for his car keys when a rough hand slapped his shoulder. Startled, he whirled around. He clenched his fist, allowing the Accord's engine key to jut out between his index and middle fingers.

Matt Simpson grinned, his body slightly hunched. Time had not been kind to the former teenage hockey star. A half-moon of flesh

hung below a sweat-stained T-shirt. His once chiseled face had grown wider and now sat nestled above a pair of chins. Stringy gray hair draped his shoulders. A cloud of body odor and alcohol hung heavy around the man, and Dean could almost sense it reaching out to smother him.

"Give me a twenty." Matt sounded as if his throat swam in phlegm. His hand reached forward, toward the baggy side pocket containing Dean's wallet.

Dean slapped the outstretched hand and stepped back, the key still protruding from between his fingers. He glanced around the parking lot; nobody seemed to notice the confrontation.

"I said, give me a twenty." Matt lunged forward.

Dean dodged to the side and extended his leg. The vagrant tripped over it and sprawled onto the pavement.

Dean unlocked the Accord with his keyless remote and rushed to the driver's side door.

"The end of the world has begun."

Dean paused, his fingers gripping the handle. *What did he say?* Matt was back on his feet, his left hand bleeding from the fall.

"There's not much time," Matt continued. "So give me some money!"

"Why?"

The question only seemed to frustrate Matt. "Because I need to buy me a case of beer and some cheap whores."

Dean released the door handle and stepped away from the car. "Who told you to say that?"

Matt turned and began limping away. He rounded the corner of the building and disappeared from view.

Dean opened the door, sat down, and snatched the letter from the passenger seat. His entire body shook. High above him, the clouds finally reached the sun, casting a shade over the car. He read the letter's scrawled words for what felt like the hundredth time.

*Three Chinamen are playing Fantam. Someone runs up to them and says, "Hey, the world is coming to an end."*

*The first one says, "Well, I best go to the mission and pray."*

*The second one says, "Well hell, I'm going to go buy me a case of Mezcal and six whores."*

*And the third one says, "Well, I shall finish the game."*



Dean knew this particular tale well; it was from one of his favorite Westerns. Receiving the hand-written message had been strange enough. What made it worse—what really sent a chill through his bones—were the signature initials at the bottom.

S.N.

He sat in the car and started the engine. *Okay, Scotty. Let's finish the game.*

• • •

Rolling clouds blanketed the charcoal sky as Dean turned onto Weston Road. The small, dead-end road had become abandoned, the remaining homes falling to ruins. Through the car's open window, he could smell the onslaught of rain in the air—they were in for one hell of a downpour.

A flood of memories rushed through him as he stopped in front of his two-story childhood home: His father barreling out the door, screaming obscenities; his mother passed out on the sofa, her clothes stained with sweat and booze; himself, as a child lying in bed, hoping that in the morning his father would be back and that they'd be a normal family once again.

He continued down the street before his feelings overpowered him, stopping at the final house.

Scotty's house.

The unkempt front yard had grown out of control and was littered with weeds. The living room's window had been smashed and crudely boarded. On the second floor, two of the master bedroom windows were cracked, and one of the shutters hung loose. It was as if the foreboding house stared down at him with a lazy eye. At the foot of the lawn, a For Sale sign hung limply at a forty-five degree angle, its colors long-since faded.

Dean killed the Accord's engine and stepped out. Immediately, a fresh wave of humidity washed over him. He strode onto the porch, opened the rusted screen door, and reached for the inside door's brass handle.

The handle didn't move.

He breathed deeply, the warm air choking his lungs. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Dean walked off the porch, turned the corner of the house, and made his way toward the backyard.

Under his feet, dandelions struggled for sunlight between the cracks in the concrete walkway. An olive green fungus coated the sienna bricks on the side of the house.

He entered the backyard. Like the rest of the property, the desolate yard had grown wild. The remnants of two broken potted plants were scattered across a small brick patio extending from the house. At one end of the patio, a weather-beaten picnic table stood guard on weary, chipped legs. Dean smiled. As kids, he and Scotty had spent countless hours playing games at that very same table. Now, he wondered if the table would even be able to hold his weight.

Dean stopped. Something was set up on the table. *This can't be happening.*

Thunder growled again, closer this time. The sky was black.

He moved toward the patio, the chessboard coming into full view. A handful of pieces remained in play on either team, the discarded soldiers piled in a heap beside the board. Someone had set up this game recently.

He spun around, his eyes scanning the surrounding tree line. *Maybe it's me. Maybe this town is driving me crazy.*

He looked back at the game and reached for one of the pieces. He paused, his index finger and thumb poised above one of the ivory Rooks. The Rook, along with both Bishops, had the dark King pinned in.

Checkmate.

There was a flash of lightning to the east, followed by a loud clap of thunder. Rain poured from the heavens.



Dean's fingers caressed the cold, wet granite. The storm had passed, dissolving into a fine mist. A light fog rolled across the cemetery, weaving between the rows of tombstones and oak trees.

"I'm sorry, Scotty." Dean stepped back and stared at the thirteen-year-old marker. "I shouldn't have come back. There's too much pain in this town."

The scent of wet grass and leaves was thick in the air. Dean's right sandal sunk into a puddle, soaking his foot.

"I always meant to return. Pay you a visit." Dean shifted uncomfortably, as if facing a room full of people, not an inanimate slab of stone.

"I never realized it would be this hard."

He crouched down and placed the dark King chess piece at the foot of the stone. "For old time's sake."

He stood and turned. There was nothing left for him in Haven's Ridge—nothing but an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach.

A sparkle of metal to his left caught his eye. Someone had hung a silver crucifix from the top of a cross-shaped headstone. Dean's legs quivered, felt weak. The cemetery spun in circles. When he regained focus, his eyes fixed on the name etched into the tombstone.

Nancy Albright.

• • •

"For the fifth time, sir, the microfilm goes in like this." The librarian was a burly woman in her mid-forties. Her brown hair was trimmed neatly into a buzz-cut, and she wore no makeup. Dean watched Louise Arncroft load the microfilm containing *The Haven Herald*, the town's local newspaper.

"You sure it was the summer of '98?"

"You betcha. I remember the incident like it was yesterday. Poor girl's husband snapped. Henry, I think his name was. The maniac almost sliced her head clean off."

Nancy Albright. Murdered. He felt stupid for forgetting—he'd heard the story about Henry losing his mind, killing his wife before taking his own life. It had never occurred to him that Nancy—his first crush—had been *that* wife. The feeling was soon replaced by anxiety. Who the hell had he been speaking to earlier? *Have I finally snapped?*

Dean felt faint, his hands clammy. If Louise noticed, she made no notion of sympathy. "Why are you so interested?"

He breathed deeply, trying to slow his spinning thoughts. "She was a friend of mine. I haven't been back in years, figured this was the right place to catch up."

"Just don't break anything."

Settling himself in the plastic library chair, he turned the knob and watched the days fly by. He scanned hundreds of articles, advertisements, and obituaries, until he finally came across a picture that made the hairs on the nape of his neck stand on end. There she was, Nancy Albright, staring back at him in all her black-and-white glory. Her infectious laugh still echoed in his ears.

He reached into his back pocket and removed the folded piece of paper. He unclipped his cell phone from his belt and dialed Nancy's number.

The operator's pre-recorded voice came on, stating that the number was out of service.

"No cell phones in the library." The librarian grabbed his wrist. "If you can't obey the rules, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"I was just checking my messages," Dean lied, surprised to discover that he couldn't wrench his hand free.

"Then do it outside."

She released her grasp, and he was thankful to feel his blood circulate once again. *What a bitch. A bitch with one hell of a memory, though.* She was walking away when he called her back.

"What about a guy named Matt Simpson?"

Louise bent over, inching close to his face. "You mean the town drunk?"

"So you know him?"

"You mean *knew* him. You'll find him in the winter 2001 obits. Got himself liquored up and slit his own wrists. They say more alcohol spilled out than blood. Let me guess—another friend of yours."

Dean could feel the blood drain from his face. Maybe he was going crazy. "Did the police suspect foul play?"

"At first. Rumor is that there were almost *too many* shards of broken whisky bottle embedded in his flesh. I guess they finally decided that he must have been too drunk to feel the pain." She grinned, as if she enjoyed recounting the grisly details. "Besides, he was no loss to this community." She turned and walked back to the front desk.

Dean wiped his sweaty hands on his shorts and removed the current microfilm. He found the January-March 2001 file in the box and loaded it into the machine.

It took less than ten minutes to find the article detailing Simpson's untimely demise. To the right of the story, a photograph showed two policemen bent over a covered body. A small crowd had formed in the background, the majority of onlookers standing in front of a little shop called Bishop and Rook Cleaners.

The name sent his heart hammering.

"Louise!"

He could hear the heavy footsteps as she approached.



"For God's sake, keep your pants on and your voice down. I'm not going to tell you again."

"I'm sorry, but I need to know about this store." His finger tapped the screen. "I don't remember this dry-cleaning business."

"Get your greasy paw off there." She removed a crumpled tissue from her pant pocket and wiped the fingerprint from the screen. "Do you realize how expensive this equipment is?"

"Look, I really need to know about this store."

"What's to know about Bishop and Rook? The place only lasted six years before a fire consumed it last April. I'm surprised it even lasted that long with the service it provided. They completely ruined two of my shirts."

"Who owned it?"

"This son-of-a-bitch right here." She pointed at a tall, lanky man near the edge of the photograph. "Earl Delrich. Collected the insurance and retired. Lives on Lansdown Drive on the far edge of town. Bastard still owes me for those shirts."

"That computer over there got Internet access?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I need to look up an address."

"You gotta clean up this mess first."

• • •

Dean leaned against his car, examining the old Victorian. The driveway was empty; the lights in the house appeared to be off.

He crossed the lawn, up the single step, and rapped on the front door. No answer. He knocked again.

*This is crazy. What would I even say if this guy Earl answered the door? Hey, I saw your picture in an old photograph. I hear you owned a dry-cleaning business called Bishop and Rook. My friend Scotty used to love chess, before he was murdered. You didn't by any chance kill him, did you?*

*My God, I am going nuts.*

Dean turned, but not before something in the windowsill caught his attention. Inside the house, staring up at him, was the dark King chess piece. Its feet were wet, as if it had marched through the damp grass to get here.

*Damn you, Scotty. Time to finish this once and for all.*

Dean reached for the doorknob and felt it turn smoothly in his grasp. He took a glance in each direction, opened the door, and stepped inside.

*What am I doing? I could be shot for trespassing.*

A rotten, musty stench enveloped him. To his right, a narrow staircase ran along the wall, leading up to the second floor. Straight ahead, a carpeted hallway spanned the length of the house, ending at what appeared to be the kitchen. A single room opened from the left side of the hallway.

He plucked the King from where it stood and dropped it into his front pocket. Then he chose the hall, stopping momentarily at the opening of an almost barren living room. The room's wallpaper had faded, many strips peeling from the edges. The only furniture consisted of a checkered sofa and a rundown coffee table; the table's surface sported as many stains as it did cracks.

He continued down the hall and into the kitchen. Bowls of rotten fruits and vegetables were lined up on the round kitchen table. Stacks of dirty dishes littered the counter and overflowed the sink.

There was a single door to his right. He opened it.

The smell of decay engulfed him and he gagged. He flipped a switch, and a solitary bulb burned bright at the foot of the wooden stairs.

Above him, a sudden rush of water flowed through rattling pipes. The toilet. Floorboards groaned as someone paced across the upper level.

Dean listened.

The footsteps descended the stairs.

Dean eased through the open basement door, closing it behind him. He remained motionless on the second step. Somewhere—either on the upper staircase or on the ground floor—the footsteps had stopped.

He had to find a way out of the house.

Slowly, he made his way down the stairs to the damp cement floor. The stench intensified with each step. His only hope now was to find either a basement exit or wait for the house's occupant to leave.

Various ground-level windows sat high in the basement walls, sunlight struggling to penetrate the dirt-encrusted panes of glass. There was a furnace, a workbench, an old washing machine and dryer. But

there was no door. No exit.

Dean entered one of the smaller adjoining rooms in the unfinished basement. There were no windows in this particular room; the only light came from what little sun managed to penetrate the entrance.

He allowed his eyes a few moments to adjust to the darkness. The foul odor clung to him, coating his flesh. Slowly, the room's decorations began to come into view: crude wooden shelves adorned with various trophies, board games, dozens of photo albums, fragments of clothing, magazines, a stack of old comic books.

An array of newspaper articles occupied the remaining space on the gray concrete walls, interspersed with blown up photographs of what appeared to be bloodied corpses. Throughout the mélange of pictures, familiar faces stared back at him. Scotty. Nancy. Even Matt, dressed in a collared denim shirt. There were other faces too—teenagers that he didn't recognize. The newspaper clippings varied from surrounding towns and districts, the dates spanning almost two decades.

The side of Dean's foot brushed up against something cold and stiff. He looked down. Resting on top of his exposed foot was an animal's rotting hind leg. Dean stepped back, landing hard against the concrete wall.

His shrink would be happy. Not only had Dean confronted his demon, he now stood in its basement.

He reached for his cell phone and flipped it open. The words *No Signal* beamed up at him from the backlit LCD screen.

He left the room, treading lightly on the rough floor.

Still no signal.

Above him, the house remained silent.

He reached the foot of the staircase and glanced up. Maybe if he was closer to ground level? He started back up.

No signal.

Another step. Then another. And another.

No signal.

His foot reached the top step.

A single black bar appeared on the left side of the phone's display.

The kitchen sink suddenly turned on. More footsteps. The fridge opened. Dean mouthed a silent prayer; he couldn't have been more

than ten feet away from the person on the other side of the door.

He pressed the 9 key on his phone. Then 1. And 1 again. Holding his breath, he pressed *Send*.

The fridge closed. Dishes rattled in the sink. Dean brought the phone to his ear.

"911 Emergency Response."

"I need help."

"Do you require the Fire Department, Ambulance, or Police?"

"Police."

"Sir, are you able speak up?"

"No."

The running water stopped.

"Just send the goddamn police to 225 Lansdown Drive. Haven's Ridge."

"Sir, are you in danger?"

The basement door opened. Dean jumped and dropped the phone. It rattled down the stairs, the LCD display momentarily sending up a beacon of light before going black.

Earl Delrich, one time proprietor of Bishop and Rook Cleaners, stared at him with fiery eyes. The cool glint of steel flashed from the large kitchen knife in his right hand.

"What are you doing in my house?" Earl raised the knife.

Dean felt a sudden sense of calm. There were no more pieces in his way. The end of the game was in sight. "It was you, wasn't it? You killed them all."

"You made a mistake coming here."

Before Earl could move, Dean leapt forward, burying his shoulder into the lanky man's chest. The two men slid across the linoleum floor, jarring the kitchen table. Glass bowls filled with rancid fruit fell from the table, shattering on impact.

Dean scrambled to his feet but Earl was just as quick.

They squared off like wild animals in a cage, Earl still clutching the knife. Without looking, Dean lifted a plate from the soapy water. Suds dripped down his hand and onto the floor.

He threw the plate. It whizzed through the air, missing its mark by a matter of inches and smashing against the far wall. He reached for another plate.

Earl charged.



Dean's fingers found a serving platter, and he swung it around. The platter bounced off Earl's shoulder, the impact knocking it from his grasp.

The blow did little to stop Earl's momentum. With a raging cry, the madman slashed with the knife. The blade bit deep into Dean's upper arm, slicing through flesh, tendons, and muscle. Warm blood flowed out of the gash.

Dean fell backwards, landing hard on his tailbone. Glass from the broken bowls sliced at his legs.

Earl pounced on him.

A sharp pain pierced Dean's side, and he gasped for air. Blinding white spots blurred his vision. He felt light-headed.

Dean watched a stream of crimson flow from the wound. He reached down and his hand brushed against something in his pocket.

Earl's face contorted into a raging snarl.

Dean's fingers wrapped around the marble object.

Earl raised the bloody knife.

A hot flash of pain seared through Dean's body as he sat up. He rammed the chess piece towards Earl's face.

Earl shrieked, dropping the knife.

Dean shoved harder.

*Checkmate, you son-of-a-bitch.*

Breathless, Dean fell back down to the floor.

For a moment, Earl glared down at Dean with pure hatred from one storm-colored eye; the King's legs poked out from the other. Then a final sound escaped his lips and he toppled over.

Dean lay on his back, trying to muster the strength to sit up. He felt the room darken before suddenly turning black.

• • •

Dean's eyelids fluttered open.

"So nice of you to join us, Mr. Campbell. You've been floating in and out of consciousness all day."

Dean struggled to keep his eyes open. He lay on his back, his throbbing head propped up on a pair of thin pillows. His lower torso was bandaged. His right arm was heavily wrapped and immobilized. An IV line was connected to his left arm. A young nurse stood beside

the bed, her chestnut hair tied into a bun.

"Where am I?" His mouth was dry, his lips chapped.

"Sherbrooke County General. The doctors say you'll be just fine. You'll be here for a couple of days, though."

His body felt as if it had been gutted then sewn back up.

He glanced over at the IV bag. "Is this necessary?"

"For now, yes. You've lost a lot of fluids. We need to get your strength back." She turned to leave, paused, and moved back to the bed. "I almost forgot. You had a visitor this afternoon."

"Who?"

"Not sure, exactly. Some teenager. He dropped this off for you. Said you might be interested in some light reading." She lifted a large manila envelope from the side table. "Want me to open it for you?"

He nodded.

Her long index finger ripped through the sealed end. She removed the object and looked at it before handing it to him. "It's a comic book."

Dean reached for the comic with his left hand. He felt a strange sense of satisfaction as he recognized its cover.

Scotty's most valuable issue of Amazing Spider-Man. •



Not even the excitement  
of knowing what was  
happening could snap  
me out of it, a realisation  
that woke me too often  
from dreams.

## Vision Quest™

Alexander Polkki

I once saw a grizzly bear shaved to its skin. The footage was from that militant activist show *Atrocity*. Diodes were clamped to the bear's corpus callosum like booster cables, flesh crinkled in electrocution. It lay impaled in a test chamber, seeking solace and strength inside itself.

The footage always flicks on in my mind when I stare at Ashley long enough. My homestay brother has the bear's turtle bean eyes, compact shoulders and immense neck. His belly is the size and solidity of an obese executioner. Burly layouts of fat and muscle are outlined in darker lines of camo, making his arms and chest seem larger than they already are. Skin is coated in wax to prevent the camo from washing off and the black flies from gorging, hardened like an old, thinned wetsuit. I wish my hair were that long so I could braid it too.

Ashley tightens the bomb to his back, a device the size of a life-guard buoy, cut like a prism. He watches me carefully.

I turn away, and gaze across the black trees. At night the forest outline always looks like art.

"Why'd they have to pick this lake?" I ask.

"You found your name here," he says, "didn't you?"

"I didn't choose it."

It has been a year since I stepped into this lake. It was a time

preceding the black tankers, before the machines started devouring at night, leaving the body weak. Morning revealed the trauma: water levels dropped, leaving tree roots exposed like bones, needles yellowed and lost.

I came here, to this interface, on my Vision Quest™, having learned about the ritual of my adopted people on the Discovery Channel. I remember running across this beach as fast as I could, leaping over boulders, tree stumps and beached lumber. I never knew I had it in me. Eight hours later I was unstoppable, like when I had to run around the field for gym class, lapping classmates, their fat undulating like waterbeds. I'd have been as plump, enslaved by the HIT as I was, except that I inherited my mother's alcoholic metabolism. I remember, back then, slipping into the zone where my body found its rhythm and just carried me. After two hours my white gym teacher had to tackle me to the ground to stop me.

My Vision Quest™, on the other hand, was something more. I covered almost a hundred kilometres in one night, entranced like those Tibetan monks you see running across the mountains on that show. Not even the excitement of knowing what was happening could snap me out of it, a realisation that woke me too often from dreams. I outran herds of some kind of animal, through stands of pine I couldn't name. At dawn I splashed into a body of water. I followed a sandbar to its outermost point, sinking to my knees. I stopped screaming but the echo wouldn't stop; it was like sonar. I suddenly possessed a whale's ability to map out continental shelves hundreds of kilometres away. The sonar poured from my skin. My body felt on fire. I could see hydrocarbons soaking individual pine needles, the mercury coating grains of sand. This was my vision, to see past the skin, to see the malignancy at the core.

The lake's gift to me.

"Excuse me," the voice said.

Two men, one white, one black, both dressed in Patagonia Outerwear, stood twelve feet away on the sandbar. Timberland sandals were secured to their belts, pants rolled up to the knees. They wore Oakley sunglasses and carried yellow, waterproof qPods. They stood shivering—the water was freezing. My sonar enabled me to watch their hearts palpitate in fear of talking to Cree, wondering why the fuck they were participating in my Vision Quest™.



“Sir,” the white one said, “you are in violation of copyright law 7890-044444888.” They looked like foetuses in ultrasound.

The black man held up his qPod. I was blinded for a moment as my retina was matched to a scan for the Great Northern census, the year I arrived.

“Heiki Jensen,” he said, “you will be invoiced \$20,059.99 for engaging in a Vision Quest™ without the permission of America & Spirit Inc.”

The glorious sonar suddenly receded. It flowed behind me, as if I was a foreign planetoid causing an eclipse; I could feel its energy, but couldn’t see it. It was leaving me. I whipped around, trying desperately to find it.

“America & Spirit will send you a pamphlet detailing the patent law. However, as a non-indigenous person, you can avoid payment by becoming an America & Spirit representative. If your native friends register for the Vision Quest™ in advance, paying the \$299.99 fee by credit card or on-line cheque, they can enjoy the tradition we are preserving. We strongly suggest you accept this offer.”

When the sonar sucked past my skin and behind my body, behind this dimension, colour faded. My skin looked grey to me, the water like oil.

“You have twenty-four hours to inform us of your decision.” They snapped their qPods closed and nodded. “Good day.”

The sonar was gone.

I watched the lawyers wade away until they became two floating bars of gold, until I couldn’t see them anymore. I knelt in the same spot until nightfall. Sometime that day my body temperature matched the freezing water. Even after I crawled home to bed, hoping to warm inside its blankets, my body was permanently changed. I was a zombie, a shell of myself, empty of life’s obligations. Dead.

One word just repeated itself in my mind, over and over. My new name.

“Cold,” Ashley says, squeezing my frigid shoulders, “if you had told me this was where it all happened, I would have come with you earlier. It’s no coincidence you find yourself here again.”

Ashley and the People’s Brigade were the only ones who knew what happened to me that night. All I told my homestay parents was that I had gone on a Vision Quest™. Nicole slurred that I was a fucking

hippie crackpot. Andrew tried to remember if he had ever done the same.

When the collection agency hired by America & Spirit knocked at our door, Ashley never hesitated. He took out his rifle and ordered the three men off his property. One of them made for a gun and Ashley clocked him one with the butt of his rifle, knocking him unconscious. He threatened to let loose on them all. Terrified, they dragged their colleague into their jeep and drove away in a panic, accidentally plunging off Jimmy's Ridge, cartwheeling down the twenty-metre cliff. The 'murders' got the People's Brigade on *America's Most Wanted*. We couldn't believe it, and celebrated for hours after the show. Somehow the program's producers got a picture of MacLeod, the leader of the People's Brigade. It was a satellite shot of us around a fire, millimetre resolution, and because of the angle MacLeod's face was the only one discernible.

Last week's episode was the third time we'd been featured, but it wasn't just because the Americans couldn't find us. The People's Brigade had evolved. We had entered a theatre from which there was no return.

"A mission has been bestowed upon us, Cold, one we have accepted as warriors of the People's Brigade." My homestay brother gestures at the lake, his huge stomach shuddering and flexing. It will be my first time committing the act. "We will do this together, as adopted brothers. Understand that timing is everything."

I nod. Speaking formally like this seems to calm my nerves. "We'll sit and contemplate the water another time."

He stares at me for a moment. "I don't think you're dead, Cold," he says. "Not yet."

We wade into the water. The temperature barely affects me, and Ashley, with his girth, can withstand it. We swim for the middle of the lake. I am to keep an eye out for the aircraft while Ashley anchors and arms the bomb. We know it will be coming to one of the lakes surrounding the biggest of them all, 'Lake Alpha'. The American military presence on Lake Alpha is a decoy. They think that if the People's Brigade sees their zodiacs preparing an operation, complete with navy seals and one-man subs, there'll be no doubt which body they'll hit. The People's Brigade pretended to fall for the trap; we promised six teenage adrenaline junkies promotion to gophers if they dressed in

Warrior camo, tied bandannas around their faces and sneaked along the shore of Lake Alpha. Once spotted they were to outrun the navy seals and sprint along Jack's Trail, into our concealed bunker. Warriors would be ready to assist if needed.

Our best guess was that the Americans would source from the second biggest lake instead, 'Lake Beta', and without any ground defence (none we could see at least), to avoid stating the obvious. I insisted on coming. The body was gracious enough to give me the vision it thought I should have, even though it was for only a moment. Perhaps if I protect it with everything I am it will grant me the experience again.

We reach the longest axis of the lake and begin treading water.

"Should be anytime," Ashley whispers.

A slight rumbling sounds across the water.

"I can't see it." I scan the lake frantically.

"Calm down. It's flying no-mode. Look south."

A black object arches above the treetops.

It circles the lake from the south, mostly silent. It's inassive. I wonder how an aircraft so large can remain almost soundless. The machine is a black body. Not even the cockpit is lit. Its wings are strange, constantly changing shape. Our mud-smeared bodies, coated in wax, hide us from thermal-sensors that are no doubt scanning the lake from geosynchronous orbit. The mine's stealth cut will keep it hidden until it's too late.

It circles the lake a second time, at a wider angle so it can loop in for its touch down. The behemoth is almost completely on its side as it flies above the forest. After a sharp turn it levels out.

"It's coming," I say.

"It knows it must give itself to us," Ashley says.

Rumbling becomes a slow roar. The surface of the lake trembles with tiny seismic waves. The sound of hydraulics seethe out over the water.

The lake erupts.

Silver froth and mist outline its propellers. The plane begins swallowing thousands of gallons of water. The aircraft is a modified military personnel carrier—the biggest ever built—one of 400 from the US vice-president's aerospace company, redesigned for efficient intake and multiple scoops, storing the water in separate tanks until

the aircraft is brimming with fresh, unpolluted water. The Americans 'tanker' the James Bay region sixty times a day, making it the least efficient and most expensive inter-basin fresh-water transfer in history.

Lake water levels have lowered by an average of two metres already. Quebec Politicians and Cree leaders made a deal with the Americans to export fresh water without consulting the People's Brigade.

Their mistake.

The plane is twenty seconds away. "Ashley! Let's go!"

Ashley types a command into the bomb's panel. He stares at it, then tries again.

Something's wrong.

"The plane must've sent out a pulse, just in case," Ashley says, "wiped the qter's logic." He brings the straps around his back, hugging the bomb to his chest. He reaches in front and flips open the panel for manual, clasping his hand around the handle. All he has to do is pull the failsafe and it will begin a generic, twenty-second countdown.

"Leave it!"

The aircraft is ten seconds away, its bottom open like baleen.

"Swim, Cold!"

"Don't do this, Ashley!"

Five second away. "SWIM NOW!"

He pulls the handle.

I stare at him, petrified. Maybe my sonar returned for a moment, because I can see Ashley's heart racing, the adrenaline throbbing through his arteries. I do a furious backstroke away in time to see him devoured. Turbulence from the propellers rips at my chest, almost as sharp as the blades themselves. A massive wave surges over me.

I surface, and watch the aircraft lift off the lake, the scoop compacting into its hull, pitch black against the sky. The colossus arches away, its technology poetic and unbeatable.

I scream at the top of my lungs when it explodes. The machine screams back, the concussion wave pushing me a few metres through the water. The explosion is mostly blinding white, with a few shades of grey. The wreckage froths in a steady stream of detonations, plummeting into the forest, white flame outlined in black smoke and black tree-tops that look like art. •



She was as hard core as it was possible to be without going to jail or missing classes.

# Spiked!

Saint James Harris Wood

There is no better place to meet the seditious than Telegraph Avenue, where I ended up a few days after the SUV debacle in San Diego. More or less on the run, I thought Berkeley seemed far enough north that I could relax. With socialists on the city council, anarchists roaming the streets, aging hippies and always obnoxious university students everywhere, I was in a free zone safe from angry authorities. My friends and fellow travelers were a necessarily loose group of undetermined number who met in Berkeley at the Crazy Bean, a coffee-house hotbed of disgruntled radicals and dysfunctional potheads. As I settled into one of the gigantic frayed couches, Bitter Johnny, Janice and Pope collectively raised their eyebrows.

There was bound to be a certain amount of static over my association with the lunatics down south who blew up twenty or thirty sports utility vehicles. In my defense, please note that I was hopped up on triple espressos and believed that we were merely going to spray paint, not explode. Mishap upon blunder, a security camera caught my image, and an indignant media disseminated it on the air and in print.

"Billy Bones! Oh my God! What happened?" Janice asked, obviously excited by a maniac of my calibre.

"Overenthusiastic punk rock Mexican hotheads is what happened."

"Well, you're famous now," Pope said, disgusted. While not the Pope, he is persistently and obscurely religious. God demands that Pope operate outside the pale.

"Where's everybody else?" I asked.

"They're afraid," said Bitter Johnny. "They don't want to get caught with the notorious eco-terrorist."

"Then why are you guys here?"

"I'm not afraid of anything," said Johnny.

"I'm only afraid of God," said Pope.

"I'm sort of afraid," said Janice, flushed and excited.

"Yeah, well... I admit my underground status is seriously shot. At least they don't know my name."

"Yet," Johnny said, expecting every situation to degenerate. Embarrassed to be a pure bred middle class suburbanite, Johnny advocated more aggressive action against our enemies. He probably admired the destruction of the car lot.

"I'll belly-down for a while," I said. I'd already cut off my shoulder-length hair and started a scruffy goatee. "So, what's happening?"

"There's some crazy shit in Oregon," Johnny said. "The lumber companies are wiggling out."

Pope shook his head and narrowed his eyes. "A bunch of people went up there to save trees, and got tattooed instead."

"Excuse me?"

"Apparently, they have some company thugs up there who get people drunk and then illustrate them from head to toe."

"It's true," Janice said. "I think it's true. Tree spikers are definitely coming back from Oregon with tattoos and wild stories. We thought they were just stoners, but then Zak shows up, covered in tattoos, and no memory of how."

What in the hell?" I didn't believe it. "What kind of tattoos?"

"Beautiful ones. Tribal designs, animals, surreal art, really weird," Janice huffed—she liked things to be scientific—and flopped down on the couch.

"What's the point," I asked.

Bitter Johnny got up, spilled coffee on himself, which he ignored, pointed a finger at the world in general, and in a low dark voice said, "They're trying to confuse us, scare us out of the forest so it can be raped. It's bullshit and egomaniac confusion tactics."

"It is confusing," I said.

"Well, the hell with that. I'm going to stop them." Johnny turned his accusing finger on me. "Billy, bail out of the city for a while, come with me."

It had been a leisurely escape from San Diego on Amtrak, watch cap pulled down and jacket collar turned up, as I cruised along the coast and through the California wilds, actually kind of restful.

"Yeah, I'll go. Maybe you all should stay here though, what with my fugitive status, and the mad tattooist." I didn't really want to go by myself.

"They are God's trees, I am going," Pope declared.

"I am not scared of any god damn tattooist." Johnny really wasn't.

"Can I go? Come on!" Janice, an eighteen year old UCB freshman, had been turned into a rabid environmentalist by a long-gone boyfriend who no longer cared about trees. She was as hard core as it was possible to be without going to jail or missing classes.

• • •

We hung around Berkeley waiting for the weekend when Janice didn't have classes. Late Friday we packed our simple needs into Bitter Johnny's ancient VW van. Sleeping bags, pounds of granola and peanut butter, and heavy foot long metal spikes filled the van. I sat in the front seat with Pope and Bitter Johnny arguing about the radio. Janice, beside herself with excitement at being included in our sortie, sat in the back with our supplies.

"This is great! I'm so glad you guys brought me. And thanks for waiting. I can't miss any classes. My parents are already freaked." Janice came from a wealthy family whose interests lay with the despoilers. Her father became regularly unhinged over her environmental projects.

We rode up the coast listening to Pope's gospel music and my punk rock. The plan didn't need to be discussed, it was simplicity itself. Janice had one of her parents' credit cards, and treated us to an extravagant meal at a tony restaurant that didn't care for our looks (Pope's beard, my leather jacket, Johnny's sullenness) but did admire the credit card.

We arrived in Sequenta National Forest Saturday morning and set up camp. The government granted the logging companies 100,000

acres to destroy, the basis for our indignation. All afternoon into early evening we spread out into the forest, spiking trees. Janice did gopher work and cheerleading, kept her eye on the camp and started a fire. When the sun set we headed back to our humble base, ate, drank wine, listened to music, and talked about the state of the earth. Under the clear starry sky, the nearly pristine forest seemed like ours alone.

"Don't you guys worry that someone might get hurt if a saw hits one of the spikes?" Janice, the soft-hearted revolutionary.

"It's risky," I said. "We mark the trees, but sometimes they ignore it. The company doesn't really care about the loggers, don't care for trees, except for the money they represent, and most especially, they don't care about us."

"All life is sacred," Pope said.

"Anybody wanna smoke a joint?" asked Johnny.

"Oh, hell yes," I said.

"Oh boy," giggled Janice.

"Fruits of the earth," Pope said.

We got high, drank more wine, and basked in the righteousness of our mission.

In the lush wilderness the possibility of trouble seemed remote. Janice excused herself to take care of personal business in the bushes. We continued to discuss whatever came to mind, and smoked another joint.

• • •

Janice had been gone for about a half hour before we noticed. Just as we agreed to go look for her, she stumbled out of the darkness into the firelight.

"Uhhh," she moaned, holding her arms out beseechingly.

"Janice, what's wrong," I asked.

"Uhhh," she said, stepping fully into the light. Designs and colors covered her arms, legs and neck. She had on cut-off jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt, and every square inch of exposed flesh, save her face, was covered with what at first appeared to be abstract patterns. Pope flipped on his industrial flashlight and played it over her legs.

"I'm on fire," Janice grasped. "My parents are going to freak out." She was tattooed with blue, yellow, reddish orange flames, perfect and realistic. We crowded around, dumbstruck. Janice, her arms spread



out, stared down at herself, occasionally looking up at us, bewildered, as if we could explain.

“Are you okay?” I didn’t know what else to ask.

“My skin... I’m on fire.”

No one knew what to say. We couldn’t take our eyes off her skin. The campfire died down, but a morbidly fascinated Pope kept his flashlight trained on her. Upon close inspection there were animals, faces and other stuff intertwined with the fire on her body. I noticed for the first time that she had a beautiful body. That would help with her job as a circus freak.

Small comments were made about details of the artwork and the fact that Janice’s hands were covered front and back. A branch or something fell down in the forest, and everyone leapt as if murderers were coming.

“I think I need to lay down,” Janice said.

“What happened?” asked Johnny.

“I honestly don’t know. One minute I was peeing... the next, I was walking back into the camping... like this.” Janice spun in a circle.

“Demons,” Pope said.

“Does it hurt?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“I never thought it would come to this,” said Johnny, “we gotta get the cops.”

“I need to lay down for a minute.”

Bitter Johnny took charge. “Billy, put Janice in a sleeping bag. Build up the fire and keep watch. Pop and I are going into town to report this. It’s only about eight miles away. We should be back in twenty or thirty minutes.”

“Look, I don’t think it’s a good idea to separate.” I didn’t like horror movies, but I knew what happened in them.

“We’re not separating. We’ll be in teams.”

“And my team is in the *forest*?”

“Do you want to talk to the cops?”

“No.” He had me.

Pope and Bitter Johnny took off in the van. Sequenta Falls had a population of about a thousand, and I realized that the local cops probably didn’t work this late. They might even be involved with the tattooists. I had no earthly idea.

I built up the fire and sat next to Janice as she shivered in her sleeping bag, and we listened. The quiet, contrarily enough, gave credence to the idea that something was out there, with a tattoo gun. Janice mumbled, "I'm on fire," every so often. Goose flesh crept up my back to my shoulders. Off in the distance someone yelled. Then I heard crashing noises, way off, like a large drunken animal headed our way. I started to put out the fire in order to hide our location, then changed my mind and heaped wood on the fire, supposing that darkness meant death and tattoos. I had an impulse to crawl into the sleeping bag with Janice and zip it up but, before I could act, a creature stumbled into camp, gasping and grunting. I screamed like a woman before noticing that the creature was Pope, wild-eyed and tattooed.

"Help me," he croaked, out of breath and witless.

"What in the hell? Where's Johnny? Where's the van? What happened?"

"Is he on fire?" Janice asked, her muffled voice coming from within the sleeping bag.

"Look at me!" Pope tore off his shirt to reveal astonishing tattoos with a religious motif. Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Krishna, crosses, stars, runes, and every damn thing, so to speak. "I don't know what happened. I came to in the woods, by myself." He took a deep breath. "These tattoos are noble, not the work of demons." Though his voice shook, I could see Pope trying to get a grip. He plopped down by the fire the study the tattoos, muttering questions to God.

"Is he on fire?"

"No, Janice. He's... it's different."

Johnny casually strolled into the camp. "Man, I'm glad the fire is going. They got me," he said, unduly calm, considering. I was a wreck. "What in the hell is going on?"

Janice got out of the sleeping bag, a little relieved that her disfigurement had company. Pope stripped to his underwear. Calmer, and rueful over his earlier loss of composure, he studied a cow on his thigh. "Holy cow."

Intricate surreal splashes, abstract landscapes, cubist explosions, renditions of famed impressionist paintings, all perfect, indelibly covered even Bitter Johnny's armpits and genitals, which he displayed to us all, somewhat to Janice's chagrin. Inexplicably, all the tattoos were healed.

"This would have cost like a million dollars if I went to a shop," said Johnny. "I wanted one maybe, like, on my shoulder."

Foremost on my mind was getting the hell out of there before I became a piece of art. "Does anyone know where the van is?"

"Last thing I remember is pulling out onto the main road," Pope said.

"So, the van is probably only a few hundred yards away. Let's go get it."

"I'm not going anywhere right now," Janice said.

"Wait until morning. What else could happen?" Johnny's calm was infuriating.

"Something could happen to me!" I had already had a bad week. "Give me a flashlight. I'm going to sprint for the road and get out of here. Who's with me?" I waved my arm—Westward Ho!—but no one responded. I split.

I made it to the van but of course the keys were nowhere. I thought of hitchhiking the hell out of there but the first vehicle to come along was a logging company truck. The loggers did bad things to people like me on dark roads at night. I beat it back into the woods.

• • •

The next thing I know, I'm standing in a small clearing, unable to move. A few feet away, an odd cylindrical shape floated about a foot off the ground. I couldn't make out any detail, the moon lay behind a cloud. My vision seemed fine and I could roll my eyes wildly, but I couldn't move. When I swallowed, my lips and tongue moved, nothing else. Worse, the cylindrical shape spoke.

"I apologize. I am obliged to mark you."

"What?" I couldn't see how the thing talked.

"It is relatively painless."

"Relatively!... No!"

"It is essential to health."

"What are you?"

"As an individual—Glide would be my name. We have much in common."

"No, we don't. I don't paralyze people and threaten them. Why are you doing this?" Every time I thought of moving, lethargy fogged my body, drugging every muscle.

"I've induced cooperation by damping your electrochemistry."

Normally, you would not be conscious for the Procedure. I wanted to talk about your work."

"What work? I don't work! I'm unemployed. What are you talking about?" I babbled, and struggled to no avail.

"I know of you. You spike trees. You are not above chaining yourself to a tree," Glide said. He didn't know the half of it.

Before running afoul of this mad tattooist thing, my duties as environmental protector went far beyond the forest. I've crashed boats into whaling vessels, released legions of test animals and, in my spare time, I like to heckle politicians at public events. Pains are taken to stay anonymous. Now this Glide character, apparently from far out of town, claims to know of my activities.

"How do you know about me? What are you doing?"

Glide whistled or sighed. "There are others coming to your line, from all directions towards this point. It's sad to think of intelligent creatures that eat the flesh and souls of other creatures."

"I don't eat meat!" I shouted. "Is that what this is about? You've made a huge mistake. Let me go!" I vigorously tried to move and managed only to grimace and growl. "What do you eat?"

"I could no more eat you than you could destroy a tree. But my facility with your language must be weak. Usually, there are no conversations with subjects."

I stopped resisting, my efforts were wasted. The moon slipped out from behind its cloud and lit the clearing. A three by two foot oval of blue, human looking flesh, with a round flat face in the middle bearing recognizable eyes and a mouth... stared at me. He, it, whatever, rummaged through a small orange canister with one of the numerous tentacles that grew from its sides. The canister too floated a foot above the ground. The alien tattooist wasn't grotesque, but the sheer extraterrestrialness of its appearance made me queasy. I'm supposed to be a crisis guy. I closed me eyes and took small breaths.

"Okay. I've heard you out. I don't eat meat of souls. I'm going to skip the tattoos," I said, coolly and patiently.

"The opportunity for discussion has ended," Glide said. "The Procedure involves little pain, compared to the option."

"Oh," I said.

From the orange canister Glide selected half a dozen golden objects about the size of silver dollars. Dropped on the ground, they



spun opaquely, evading my eyes' focus. Seemingly of their own accord, the tiny machines swept into my shoes, swirled up and around my legs, leaving complex designs. Within minutes the little artists had covered my entire body. The paralysis left me. Since the devices had done most of their business beneath my clothes, I had to take them off to see what had been done.

"Huh," I said, quietly flabbergasted. "Unbelievable." I stood naked, barely breathing, and studied the tattoos. On my chest blazed an enormous psychedelic sun, with all of the solar system's celestial objects splayed over my arms and stomach. Runes, mysterious icons, hieroglyphs, mathematical symbols, lost alphabets and tribal designs embroidered my legs, arms and feet—dispersing into every crease and wrinkle. As I pulled my pants back on I noticed on the palm of one hand, a demented portrait of John Lyndon, and on the other, a miniature, achingly realistic portrayal of Pompeii at the moment of its destruction. I figured only punk rock girls would date me now.

"You will understand," Glide prophesied.

I blacked out for a second, then found myself back at the campsite, where I had materialized out of the darkness, to my friends' astonishment.

"Billy!" Janice stared raptly, expecting me to do something else wondrous.

Pope saw the tattoo and lost all color. "Dear God! What is happening?"

"You're not going to believe it. It's not loggers. Aliens did it!"

"An alien did what?" Janice asked.

"He... it... gave me, us, the tattoos!"

"Mexicans? You're high! Can you believe this?" Johnny asked Pope.

Pope whispered, "This is the end. We're being marked and driven mad."

"Listen to me!" I cried.

"Look!" Janice said, pointing to the sky. "What is that?"

In the sky a massive orb of light washed out the stars. It described a circle around the area, then dropped to hover above the trees near our camp.

"It's a miracle," Pope moaned.

Three dark figures separated from the orb, crashed through the trees and hit the ground in the forest around us. The nearest stood, ten feet tall, shook its considerable mass, and emitted a shrill, somehow deep roar. The other two, further off in the bush, answered with bellows. Having connecting with its cohorts, the thing turned towards

us. It had two arms and legs but no apparent head. The blotchy body, moist and covered with small irregular spikes, oozed a viscous fluid that stank of skunk and barbecue sauce. The creature stepped in our direction.

"I don't eat meat!" I shouted. "Everybody run!"

Janice took off into the woods like a shot, with more speed than I would have thought possible. I made only a few steps before the monster, with an astonishing bound, knocked me off my feet, and pinned me down as if I were a bug.

"Orghhh," I moaned, fearing body piercing next, or ritualistic scarification.

Two dumbfoundingly quick giant figures swooped through the trees like bulky acrobats to pin down Pope and Johnny.

Pope shrieked as the huge fingerless stump of a hand smeared the thick skunky sauce over his face and down his body. All three monstrosities yodeled an eerie basso profundo melody, and started rubbing the slimy sauce on our bodies too. A cacophony of screams and yodeling rang through the forest.

The first creature bent over at an impossible angle to rip Pope's jeans, already at the last stage of shabbiness, off his legs. From its torso the thing produced a gaping maw, foul and dripping, that sucked in both of Pope's legs to the knees.

"Gahh!" Pope screeched. "Nooo!"

Suffering exquisitely as he watched Pope get eaten, Johnny wrigged like a lunatic trying to swim, but stayed pinned to the ground.

With Pope's legs in its maw, the monster's cacophony fell out of sync with that of the other two horrors. It vomited the uneaten legs and leaped off Pope, who must have rolled twenty yards before hitting the tree Janice had just collapsed behind. She woke and screamed.

The retching monster lurched over to Johnny, gummed him, then stood tall with a pitiful wail. The other two whined in agreement, and all three vanished with a vacuum-filling pop—leaving us moist and smelly but unharmed.

"What the hell?" Pope uncharacteristically cursed. "What in the *Hell*?"

Johnny swam several yards into the woods, rolled over and started to cry.

I took a deep breath, carefully sat up and wiped the foul digestive juices from my face. Pope cursed. Janice caressed her tree. Johnny wept softly. I stared up at the sky. •

# The Restraining (Disorder)

Saint James Harris Wood

He trained three homing pigeons  
to fly back in time  
towards the nest  
where they'd been born  
carrying messages  
made of magnetism  
tips on the stock market  
to his long dead wife.

He wanted time to know  
that he still loved her  
cared about her finances  
and eventual reincarnation.

The first pigeon got lost  
captured by a shaman  
baked into a pie  
used to seduce a warrior.

the second went sideways  
into an alternate take  
where pigeons were seen as signs  
stuffed, bronzed and contemplated.

The third went forward  
a thousand years or so  
found the wife who wept  
at the memory  
of her former life  
and the man  
who wouldn't let go. •

In this, as in much,  
Hitler was mistaken.

# Why Does the Freed Tiger Glare, If Indeed It Glares At All?

Robert Lake

Hiram Walker, the peg-legged publican, who runs the New Soho Arms and Leg, has inflicted the same lame story on his regulars every single one of his birthdays since he immigrated to Loon County fifty years ago. Today he's 100 and begins: "War condemned me to a ring-side seat beside Lord Honorius Canterbury Yorick and Abel Mann, Commandant of Stalag 666, at the single greatest massacre in the history of Europe. In 1942 Air Marshall Goering's nephew shot me down over Germany while I was piloting a routine flight from Newfoundland to New York. I've always had trouble distinguishing right from left."

"Just remember that your left's the side you don't have a leg to stand on," always ripostes Ramsis Royce, a balladeer, who sits at a special table because he downed the very first draft Hiram served in the Arms and Leg.

Even swamped in senility Hiram's canny enough to ship in lap dancers from the big city to ensure an audience for his meandering memories. I, of course, attend in my capacity as Hiram's therapist—



Hiram has big-game issues—not because of the sex workers. Hiram grumbles that the World War II firebombing of Dresden, once a gracious city of bridges and spires, butchered his budding acting career, leaving him with a big-game hunting addiction. Show him a moving pair of antlers and he instinctively fires. As a responsible therapist, I have encouraged him to frame his desire to shoot everything over 100 pounds as shooting issues. Addiction is too negative a word.

Hiram's glare says I better stop interrupting.

"Lord Yorick himself cast me in the stage version of Abel Mann's greatest story: *The One-legged Orphan Who Learned to Hop, Skip and Jump*," yells Hiram. The Arms and Leg is noisy, not surprising for a tavern, which boasts Canada's most conscientious drunks. I, of course, am not a conscientious drunk myself.

"Will you stop interrupting, asshole?" Hiram shouts, obviously not at me. "*Hop, Skip and Jump*, as everybody knows nowadays after its notorious staging at London's Old Vic, demands an actor, whose protruding belly shakes merrily upon command. Naturally, Lord Yorick, a prisoner like me, realized I was perfect as the role model, who teaches the one-legged orphan to hop, skip and jump. Of course, back then I lacked my many coloured tattoos, which portray the maps of my searches on seven continents for game to shoot."

"Your wrinkled skin and the Soviet Union splintering into dozens of countries makes your tattooed maps useless," heckles Ramsis.

While Ramsis and Hiram spat, I better fill you in. Abel Mann, a cultured man who wrote children's stories to numb the tedious horror of being Commandant of a prisoner of war camp, had adapted his most elevating story for the stage, believing in time the hopping, skipping, jumping, one-legged orphan would rival the Nutcracker as a Christmas tradition. Mann always wrote in English, believing it a simple language, uniquely suited to children, a conclusion he had reached at Oxford before the war.

"Consider John Donne's admonishment: Death, be not proud. A simple command that any intelligent child can easily grasp," Mann told Lord Yorick, a Cambridge don when not liaising with assassins in good causes. The British had parachuted Yorick into Germany to sign employment contracts with Wehrmacht officers, who promised to assassinate Hitler in return for executive positions with American corporations. Alas, a pigheaded colonel, who demanded a senior vice-presidency with the Cadillac division of General Motors, betrayed

Yorick, bawling a Chevrolet dealership in Kitchener, Canada would demean a descendant of Teutonic knights. Stalag 666's guards maintained that Yorick had purchased his life by listing in alphabetical order the names and home addresses of the German conspirators. Hiram and the other prisoners believed that Yorick had remained silent, save for the odd scream here and there, and his life was spared because Hitler assumed Yorick's connections with English royalty might prove useful later. In this, as in much, Hitler was mistaken.

Mann reveled in Yorick's melodious reading of his stories, perhaps because Mann himself read aloud atrociously: Russian shrapnel had ripped apart his chin, producing disgusting table manners and a sauerkraut-stained uniform. Despite his distinguished war record, Mann, who had earned three Iron Crosses, was no admirer of Der Fuhrer and told Hiram and Yorick that Hitler was doomed. Fanatics, fatigue and routine would continue the war, but only for a time, after which Mann's stories would become bridges, arching over the rivers of revenge, rape and pillage left by the war. Europeans, even gypsies, more despised than Jews, would cross Mann's bridges into a new era of peace.

His greatest pleasure was transporting himself, Hiram and Yorick's voice to Dresden's scenic spots. On Albert Bridge, which once upon a time arched over the Elbe, Mann, Hiram and the citizens of Dresden listened to Yorick read: *The Orphan Who Learned to Ford the River Until Post War Reconstruction Built a Bridge*. Beneath the gold cross atop the three-hundred-foot dome of the ancient Frauenkirche, Yorick read aloud Mann's story: *The Orphan Who Learned to Kneel in Repentance for Wartime Atrocities*. At the world famous Grosser Garten zoo, Yorick read aloud: *The Orphan Who Learned to Lie Down With the Lion Who Had Gorged On his Family*. At the Friedrichstadt Sportsplatz, west of the doomed city, Yorick read aloud: *The Orphan Who Learned To Cheer Good Play By Visiting British Football Teams, Even Those Accompanied by Hooligans Opposed to the Euro*.

"The Euro wasn't even thought of back then," sneers Ramsis.

"Like all geniuses Abel Mann was both behind and ahead of his time," Hiram contends.

"Bah. Mann's stories regurgitate the same stale theme," says Ramsis Royce.

This sally ignites Hiram's temper. "A writer, even a genius, has a single theme, although one with infinite variations. Mann believed

everyone despairs. A blessed few happen upon an odd, but ordinary person, who exemplifies the wisdom of living simply and honourably. In every Mann story a youngster plots vengeance on humanity, but is intercepted by a jovial soul, who teaches the orphan the joys of decency.”

“Hogwash,” retorts Ramsis, a spindly geezer with carrot-red braids, a guitar, drums, and a mouth organ. He claims he has pawned his happiness to provide his people with ballads. Lord, they’re dreadful. In one he refutes John Donne, claiming Death, although one miserable bastard, has every right to be proud. After all, it nails everybody sooner or later.

“Mann’s stories are saccharine trash,” declares Ramsis.

“On the page, perhaps,” Hiram concedes. “But uttered with Yorick’s bittersweet yearning, they were masterpieces. Passing musicians invariably began composing operatic versions after a few sentences. Itinerant refugees, who were pouring into Dresden ahead of the Russian army, wept in the Altmarkt, scene of centuries of commerce, as Yorick’s voice paused, paused, paused, before flowing on to recite the conclusion of *The Orphan Who Learned to Give Fair Change*.”

“And how did it conclude?” Hiram’s patrons ask, hoping for a free round.

Hiram weeps a little before quoting Mann, “Then little artistically challenged orphan Adolf ran after Herr Rommel to give him fair change.”

“Hogwash, Hiram,” protests Ramsis. “Them Krauts couldn’t understand English and you said Abel Mann wrote his treacle only in English.”

“Of course, they couldn’t understand the words, you tone-deaf balladeer. But they understood Yorick’s melancholy melody, which, oddly enough, buoyed their hopes.”

“Oh, sure, Hiram,” retorts Ramsis. “British bombers were plopping daily on Dresden and the locals cheered a hoity-toity English aristocrat.”

Hiram angrily corrects Ramsis. Dresden had been spared the bombs that pockmarked other German cities. Dresden’s citizens believed they were safe because their city represented European civilization, an oxymoron in Yorick’s opinion. Many refugees in Dresden believed Hitler had negotiated a secret pact with Winston Churchill: Dresden for Oxford, both not to be damaged. Others believed the Americans spared Dresden because a new Germany dedicated to peace would need a new capital. What better place to resurrect the culture of Goethe and Beethoven than tolerant and urbane Dresden?

"The folks in Hiroshima figured they were safe too, little suspecting they were spared to demonstrate the power of that atomic bomb," sadly observes Ramsis every year. He attributes humanity's fondness for massacres to a failure to heed balladeers, particularly himself.

"One old man told Yorick that no one was evil enough to bomb Dresden," claims Hiram.

"Certainly not the race of men who speak the language of Shakespeare," replied Yorick, his voice so savoury that pregnant peasants wheedled him to whisper to their bellies assurances of a safe delivery.

"Bombing Dresden das nicht cricket," riposted Abel Mann, whom the Russians shipped to Siberia after the war. Hiram calls this a war crime, arguing that a merry man should never be forced to hack permafrost, no matter how many murderous orders he has followed.

While Dresden believed itself safe, trucks jammed with paintings trundled westward across cold Germany, one carrying *The Stonebreakers* by Gustave Courbet. During his sixtieth-birthday recital of the bombing of Dresden, Hiram paused to wonder if Courbet had foreseen British bombers would destroy his painting. "Of course not," laughed Hiram's drunken patrons, who were quickly corrected by Marshall McLuhan, who was in the Arms and Leg, inspecting Hiram's tattoos for directions to the global village.

"The artist is the historian of the future," pontificated Marshall, who quickly departed when Ramsis told him he was full of it, and that balladeers write not only the past, the present and the future, but the bits in between too.

Since Hiram's only a few furlongs short of death, he figures the future's a non-entity and mumbles on about hungry and stinking refugees camped in February's dank cold in parks and streets, and packed into Dresden's Central Station, praying for trains to carry them away from approaching Russian tanks. Hungry children whined as their mothers soothed them by crooning they were safe in Dresden. Abel Mann ferried Yorick about to read his hastily written: *The Orphan Who Learned to Wait Patiently While Mummy Suckled The New Baby, Conceived During a Russian Gang Rape*.

"That very night the skies opened to expose Dresden to the luminous heavens," says Hiram.

"OOOoooooiiiiiseeeee!" wails Birdseye Wolsey every birthday.

"Cruel Birdseye," charges Hiram. "Your drippings helped slaughter more babies than even that solitary turd Colonel Tibbetts plopped on



Hiroshima.”

Even Ramsis doesn't argue with that. The rank ordering of holocausts presents weighty methodological problems beyond the capacity of senile publicans and balladeers.

Birdseye piloted a bomber to Dresden and, not surprisingly, he and Hiram have different viewpoints of that bloodthirsty evening. Hiram remembers his bowels bloated with constipation, and sitting on the crapper looking up at the Big Dipper. Birdseye remembers flying across the English Channel toward Aachen. Thick clouds covered the continent and static electricity cavorted bluely along his wings. Suddenly, the clouds parted and scores of planes swooped to release magnesium flares, which dangled above Dresden like glittering chandeliers. Birdseye remembers humming a Viennese waltz, as the Lancasters dumped bombs on Dresden, as if their holds had been doused with Ex-Lax, and then slipped away toward Nuremberg.

The following morning gritty rain pelted Abel Mann, Yorick and Hiram as they drove muddy miles to Dresden. Lord Yorick's sophisticated finger flicked a smouldering wisp of lace handkerchief from his shoulder.

“Perhaps the rain will dampen the fires in Dresden,” said Hiram.

“Milord, enlighten this asinine cripple,” sneered Abel Mann. Yorick explained, as if at a Cambridge tutorial, dissecting John Milton. Saturation bombing had ignited thousands of fires in Dresden, which violently heated the air above the city to 1,000 degrees Celsius, creating a vicious updraught, a ravenous beast sucking gales of fresh air into the fire centers. This air, with the ferocity of a tornado, swooped through the ancient city to fuel the inferno. As the fierce heat drifted toward the Elbe River, it cooled, producing a gritty rain, full of remnants of Dresden, where yellow-brown smoke obscured the sun.

“Abruptly, Abel Mann braked to avoid hitting a llama,” says Hiram dramatically.

“Hogwash, Hiram,” protests Ramsis. “Dresden's nowhere near the Andes.”

“Of course not,” retorts Hiram. “The llama escaped from the zoo. At the circus Sarassani the stench of the roasted corpses of Arabian horses assaulted every nostril save those of the joyful vultures tucking into an unexpected breakfast.

“Get serious, Hiram,” commands Ramsis. “You're not filming a John Wayne epic in the Arizona desert. You can't just stick in vultures.”

“Death is an inept busker, not a refined wit. The vultures had escaped from the zoo to gorge on Arabian barbecue. That day I shot gazelles and lions, even the odd elephant, in my day a Hemingway wet dream of an African safari,” Hiram always sighs. “We had to shoot them before the ravenous beasts began prowling the city for food. What was a necessity that day became my present addiction.”

“Not addiction, Hiram. Shooting issues,” I gently correct, ignoring the snickers of the drunken audience.

“I’ve heard English aristocrats love hunting. Did Yorick shoot game too?” asks Ramsis.

The patrons always enjoy this part best because they know it heralds the ending and they can attend to more contemporary fables, namely those of the World Wrestling Federation. “Wow, those wrestling guys sure can script better than you,” yells Birdseye Wolsey to irritate me.

Hiram pauses, threatens to send the lap dancers home, if he doesn’t have complete silence, and then continues, “Abel Mann handed Yorick a rifle, commanding him to kill a tiger. Yorick, a pacifist, refused, even when the Commandant repeated the command.”

“What did Abel Mann say?” the patrons ask, knowing this is their last chance in this story for a free round. Hiram is becoming stingier with age.

“Kill or be killed, Lord Honorius Canterbury Yorick,” says Hiram. “That was Abel Mann’s command. He pointed his revolver at Yorick’s temple. Yorick raised his gun. The tiger glared.”

“Why did that damned tiger glare?” wonders Ramsis.

“Approaching death tends to piss even tigers off,” opines Birdseye Wolsey.

“Perhaps the tiger found freedom in German cold intolerable after the warm languor of his fantasies of freedom,” I suggest.

“I’ll bet that damn tiger never glared at all. Probably its eyes merely momentarily glinted in the sun, even though smoke obscured the golden orb’s journey to Hades,” pronounces Ramsis. His metaphors are utterly wretched, plagiarized from poems, mostly forgotten, that he was forced to memorize as a schoolboy. Unbelievably, schools were permitted, nay encouraged, to systemically abuse students by teaching English literature.

“Maybe Hiram wrongly imputes a glare to the tiger, thereby privileging an act of existential rebellion,” suggests Birdseye Wolsey’s niece, boning up for her college exams by reading Existentialism for

Dummies. Things got really confused on Hiram's eightieth birthday when Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska stopped by the Arms and Leg to read us a poem. *Each of us wished to have a homeland/free of neighbours/and to live our entire lives/in the interval between wars.* She wryly asked Hiram why he assumed the tiger was male.

"No offense, Wislawa, but no female could glare so ferociously," replied Hiram politely.

"Chauvinist pig," screamed half the patrons in the Arms and Leg.

"Self evident," yelled the other half, consisting of males.

That set off the glaring match that erupts every birthday Hiram recounts the destruction of Dresden. Men and women attempt to glare each other into submission, which is only ended by the desperate wails of Hiram. Ramsis to calm his oldest friend rises to sing his most powerful ballad: *Why Does the Freed Tiger, Male or Female, Glare/If, Indeed, It Glares At All.* The patrons order another round and more lap dancing, Birdseye Wolsey turns up the sound on the TV, and soon the grunts and taunts of World Federation Wrestling drown out Ramsis' lament.

"Every time I kill an animal, I'm trying to erase that glare," Hiram in the fetal position whimpers in my office.

"The tiger's glare or Abel Mann's or Yorick's or your own?" I ask.

"All life's glares."

I'm tempted to ask if Yorick dropped the tiger with a single shot, or refused and was summarily executed by Abel Mann, but Hiram's lascivious caressing of his assault rifle's hair trigger restrains me. •

My knees wobble.  
That door is marked:  
EXAMINATION.

# Silicon Singularity

Ernie Reimer

*In the century that begins with 9/11, a global SARS epidemic and a fundamentalist Christian jihad in Iraq...*

Longhaired travellers with coats and carry-ons inch toward security while the shorthairs hurry past, trying not to see us. The man in front of me shuffles a nervous dance. Flight announcements echo. A bird flutters and panics between arched girders in the high glass ceiling, as a cleaner approaches. Two brown feathers drift down. One lands near my feet and a drone scurries up to sweep it away, leaving only a smear of disinfectant. I reach the frosted booth and swipe my finger across the DNA scanner. I'm sure they'll smell my vagrant thoughts.

The door clicks shut. The booth says, "Dr. Erika Joyce Sebastian, turn for the cameras."

X-ray cameras, radar and MRI cameras, terrahertz cameras probe my body.

Sweat tickles down my side.

I wait.

The booth hums; its fan-breath smells of rubber tubing, summer lightning and reagent bottles with deaths-head labels.

A light winks from amber to red.

"I-Is there a problem?"

"Your face does not match your DNA."

"I was in an accident. My face was reconst—surely you have my file?"

A metal tongue slides out from the booth's blank wall. "Place a hair on the sample tray."

I unfasten the clip. My long hair falls. I trawl fingers through to catch a loose strand, thinking of my parents, young and beaming in their framed photo on the wall. Their hair was short. My hair is legislated long. These tresses are a record of everything I've eaten, a testimonial to be presented when it suits them.

I place a hair on the machine's sticky tongue. It disappears.

"Another," says the booth. "This one has no root."

This time, I grasp a sound hair and yank it out. The booth takes my offering and after a pause, the light turns back amber—there is no green; suspicion is endemic. "Proceed through the door on your left."

My knees wobble. That door is marked: EXAMINATION.

The security officer's cropped hair is blonde and almost invisible. Her head looks bald and naked behind the Lexan podium, the high-necked Kevlar coat and the prophylactic facemask.

"You were drinking last night, Dr. Sebastian."

"Yes?"

"Why?"

"It was a farewell party in my Department. I'll be away for six months."

"You drank the night before as well, and your diet has been poor for the past year. Your alcohol intake is above the recommended norms."

"Is that a crime?"

Her eyes narrow. "Not yet."

"My husband left me." It isn't a lie.

"We have counsellors."

"I don't want a counsellor; I want Ashok."

"Destination?"

"Berlin."

"Purpose?"

"I'm doing historical research on the origins of the"—I hesitate, unsure of propriety—"the neural shunt?"



"The implant?" She stretches word into a sentence, as if to say. You? A deadhead? What business is that of yours?

"Yes, the implant."

The fabric of her facemask bulges slightly as she exhales. She looks me over, again, with cold eyes. "Are you aware that Europe does not enjoy our high standards of security?"

"I've been through all of this already."

"Nevertheless, I must ask you to reconsider your journey. Can't your inquiries be completed from here?"

"No, they can't." That's what I had argued. "I have to interview the scientists and technicians who worked on the implant. Their lives aren't recorded. Europeans don't have cameras everywhere the way you—the way we do."

In the departure lounge, I lean against the wall and gasp for air. My legs shake. Our flight is four hours delayed. I find a bench and try to make myself inconspicuous by not looking at anyone. The blue-veined skin of my inner wrist pulses with my heartbeat.

Ashok told me that skin is the largest organ of the body. He was naked against me and I imagined our nerve endings pressed together—he named them for me once: Meissner and Pacinian corpuscles, Merkle discs, Ruffini organs—in intimate contact. I imagined his sensory homunculus communing directly with mine, copulating with exaggerated hands and lips and genitalia, invisible to the cameras. But the Wireheads stole even that privacy from us with their neural shunt. And they took Ashok.

I stood behind him that evening, one hand on his shoulder, fingers coiling in his long, oiled hair. I'd come in—as I often did late at night when I'd read enough—in a gown, with my hair loose and brushed. If he was preoccupied, I'd find a place against his body and doze. Often he worked until dawn, but that night the wallscreen was blank, the gloves were empty and the room was lit only by reflected city neon.

"What are you thinking?"

He covered my hand with his. "We must talk, Erika."

I put my fingers on his lips. "No." I knew what was coming. "Don't leave me, Ashok."

"I won't leave you; you will come with me."

"I can't. I need to be human." Outside the window, over the lake a passing plane flashed red and green. My lips touched Ashok's earlobe. "I don't want a silicon chip inside my head, spying on my thoughts. And I want you the way you are."

"It will not be implanted in your brain, Erika. No one will hear your thoughts."

"We have so little privacy." I wanted his hands under my gown, hidden from the cameras, kneading my back, whispering to a breast, addressing discreet inquiries—or rude suggestions—to my inner thighs. "Now they want our bodies too?"

"Domestic surveillance is for our protection." His hand was warm; my cheek was wet.

"And the hair scans? They're for us too?"

"Do you think we should eat and drink anything we want? Remember how people used to die?"

"But at least they lived."

"With the implant we will have better reflexes and perfect health—and that is only a side effect. We will be able to enter the plex, augmented reality. It is the new world. If we stay here, we are obsolete, doomed Neanderthals."

"Why?"

"Because it is the future. Come with me, Erika."

"I don't want my sensorium exposed."

"It is much more than that."

"I can't, Ashok. I can't go there; I need my body for myself." I inhaled his curry-cinnamon musk. "And I want your body the way it is."

His beard was rough against my cheek as he turned. "Is that all you want of me?"

"Well," I sniffled and smiled in the darkness, "Maybe other things too. Tell me a story."

I held him that night, but I knew that he would go. It was as though the implant had had been invented just for him, a new brush for his tactile art. And the plex was the perfect canvas for his sensory scapes.

When he came back from the clinic, enhanced, I wept. He was a Wirehead. He laughed in empty rooms and talked to phantom people. His eyes were always elsewhere, watching overlays that I couldn't see.

"It's incredible, Erika," he said. "The palette is so much richer than I ever dreamed. I can display everything, anything: a hint of sandalwood? the prickling hairs on the back of your neck?... anything a person feels." We were together on the couch. His hands idled on my body. "And everything I touch and hear and see and smell is filed in my personal archive. I can cut-and-paste memory directly into a scape."

"Are you filing me?"

"Of course. Especially you." He was so candid and ingenuous, so trusting.

I wasn't; I shrugged his hands away. "That's obscene."

"No, Erika, it's not like that." A siren echoed up from the streets below. "You don't understand. Perhaps... please let me show you my new scapes? Just one?"

I had to wear gloves and goggles and even so, I couldn't get inside the scape the way he could—the way Wireheads could; I was a dead-head.

"I made this for you," he said.

I saw it and hated him. I exiled him from my life. I wouldn't let him see me or hear me or touch me—ever. Ashok, the brilliant media artist. The critics said he was a master of subtle articulation. Too subtle for me.

I drank alone and buried myself in research. The plex closed over North America and I became a self-appointed historian. Who better than a cultural anthropologist to record the demise of *Homo sapiens*? His messages piled up, unopened. I never saw him, but I could feel him watching as months stretched into years as I became obstinately obsolete, one of a shrinking aboriginal minority who would soon be protected for their own good.

My plane is boarding. My spine prickles as I approach the gate. They're setting up reservations for us, places where we can preserve our culture. I turned my research toward Berlin, toward the origins of the neural shunt. I applied for a travel grant and an exit visa. Perhaps Ashok helped; I'll never know; I won't come back.

The ocean slides by below: grey, rippled, endless. How could the Vikings have crossed that sea in tiny wooden boats? I order a drink and

try to remember Ashok's fingers telling stories, posing riddles, my body answering, his laughter, our delight. The memory is worn with use, cracked and faded. How I envy the Wireheads their archives, their perfect replay.

Berlin is glass and steel lacework, built after reunification and before the dissolution. I unpack in my hotel, a three-story walk-up near the Zoo. They're human here: loose, imperfect, laughing and crying and bleeding. It's wonderful on the streets. I bask in their warmth, the smells and cries, the exhalations of humanity.

A taxi takes me to the Eriksson-Hancock Institute. The streets bustle with pedestrians, streetcars, schoolchildren in uniform. At the Institute, a cool receptionist asks me to wait.

A man emerges from the elevator bank and Larus Valdmarrson introduces himself, extending his hand. I bow in response—a prophylactic American custom. He ushers me into the elevator.

Berlin's rooftops stretch away below the glass-walled, thirteenth-floor office. I stumbled over his last name.

"Just call me Larus," he says and tells me that he has been assigned to host the American Professor. "Such a comely guest, it will be my pleasure." He's square-jawed and pale-eyed. His close-cropped hair makes me think Wirehead, but he's not. He answers my questions in perfect Oxford English, deliberately inflected with a charming trace of Saxon. "Yes, the first neural shunt was prototyped right here in this building. Of course, the Institute was not a division of Eurogene Corporation at that time; we really had nothing to do with that first neural shunt. But it was developed here." He gestures around the room. "This will be your office while you're here, Dr. Sebastian."

"Please, it's Erika."

He rests polished fingernails on the obsidian tabletop.

"Tell me, Larus, I've never understood: Why hasn't the neural shunt been adopted in Europe?"

"Ah, you Americans, you are so enamoured of technology. You fill your bodies with silicon. You all want to be cyborgs. We Europeans value our humanity."

"Not all of us want to be machines."

"So you say, but how long will you resist?"

"I... I may not go back."

“Really? And what of your security? Your antiseptic customs and your walled cities? Can you really be comfortable? We touch each other here.” I flinch as he reaches across the table. His fingers touch the back of my hand. It burns, like Ashok’s art.

I met Ashok in a gallery during the plague: ten years of Avian flu, SARS, CJD, West Nile, and others, an endless assault. We wore facemasks and latex gloves and avoided body contact. He was the perplexed immigrant, a frustrated tactile artist, starving for audience. He chided me for my gloves and prophylaxis. “These things don’t make any difference. Everyone must die of something. This is geriatric paranoia.”

“That’s not what the Health Authorities tells us.”

“And you believe everything they tell you?”

He touched everything. He touched me.

My research at the Institute begins with the list of neurosurgeons and physiotherapists, the software mechanics and the engineers who created the shunt. And a list of those first volunteers. Many of them are dead, some are confined to wheelchairs, others are just confined. I track them down and begin my interviews, I synthesize a scape from their disremembered lies and hazy truths. History.

“Is your hotel comfortable, Erika?” Larus has caught me in the hallway. “Have you seen the city? Perhaps I could take you to dinner this evening and show you around?”

The restaurant is on Unter Den Linden, near the Institute. The meal is heavy: schweinbratten with dumplings and sauerkraut, too much sweet wine. When we leave, I’m queasy.

“Do you mind if we walk, Larus?”

“It is several kilometres to your hotel.”

He offers me his arm. I hesitate, then take it; I’ll learn these customs.

After the deserted park, Kantstrasse is a hive: late night commerce, stale beer and urine, drifting music, trysting couples. My head is clear but I’m still holding Larus’ arm as we step aside for a trio of yipping louts in leather, and after them a twosome, his arm around her shoulder, her arm around his waist. Larus turns and puts his hand against my breast. He pushes me against a glass storefront, ignoring the passers-



by, his pelvis against mine. I try to twist away but he pins me with his body strength, his Euro freedom.

The neural shunt was made for sex. On-line sex, remote sex, virtual sex, enhanced sex, group sex. *Headfuckers*—that's what those first volunteers were called on Berlin streets. The Institute invested billions in sex. What other urge could drive such frantic engineering? And they had hundreds of eager volunteers. But the Institute foundered in bankruptcy when the clinical trials were almost complete. The shunt was auctioned off as junk. It crossed the Atlantic, where, stripped of sex, it had military potential and promised power and wealth for governments that were desperate to revive a moribund economy. Now it holds North America in thrall, just as Larus holds me in thrall. I meet him every night, in his bed. Our Merckles discs and Ruffini organs couple, sex without intimacy.

She was stepping out of a bathtub, her body slightly bent, one leg just clearing the rim, reaching for a towel, water draining from her body's planes and running from the tuft between her legs. Sheen on skin, discrete breasts. Unselfconscious. An escaped strand of tied-up hair clinging to her neck. I had to look away.

"Touch her," Ashok said. "She's much more than what you see."

I reached, clumsy in the goggles and gloves.

"You will only get a glimpse, but it is better than nothing. You will have to imagine the smell of lavender, soap and warm water."

I touched her cheek. Damp skin yielded to my finger. I traced a line across her jaw, touched her clavicle and pulled back.

"Go on."

He wrapped his fingers over mine the way he often did and guided them across her shoulder. Muscle, bone and cartilage, corrugations of rib under creamy skin, a swelling of edge of breast, a soft abdomen, a hard arc of pelvic bone. I jerked my hand away and tore off the goggles.

"Is that me?"

"The bones and the internal organs are from a generic armature."

"How could you. I mean—"

"Look at her, Erika. What do you feel?"

What did I feel? "Betrayed," I said. I was ashamed because she wasn't me; that's what hurt. She was open, trusting, confident—everything

Ashok was, and I wanted to be but wasn't. "You bastard."

"Erika, this is for you. It is about you. I—"

"Stay away from me." I may have screamed. I was ugly.

I stare over the Berlin rooftops at the bulb of the Fernsehturm, trying to forget the look in Ashok's face—despair—when Larus steps into my office without a knock. His eyes are cold, his smile thin.

"Come for a drink, Erika. You work too hard."

In the noisy bar, he gulps a beer and shouts at Herr Ober for another.

"What is it, Larus?"

"We should go to Reykjavik." He inspects his fingers wrapped around the mug. "We must take a break from all of this."

"But my work..."

"Ah, leave it. Those people will still be here when you come back." With the back of his hand, he wipes froth from his lip. "Come with me to Iceland. I will show you where I was born. We will tour the glaciers and the hot springs."

"Why now?"

"Why not now?"

He grimaces when we land in Keflavik. We take a taxi past the smelter, over the lava beds, to the Skaldbreid Hotel. I want to believe that nothing is wrong. I undress in front of him, slowly, but he watches me with dead eyes and turns away.

At breakfast, over a demitasse of steaming coffee and a bowl of yoghurt and the clatter of spoons and muted early morning voices, I say, "What's wrong, Larus?"

He tears a croissant. "I think we must not return to Berlin."

"Why not?"

"There is an epidemic."

"That's just a flu. I have to finish my work."

"Forget your work."

We leave tourist in the city for two days and then return to Keflavik to catch a flight to Akureyri. In the departure lounge, before we board, the wallscreen programming is interrupted by a grim-faced Euro One announcer who says, "Berlin has been quarantined. Saxony has banned all but essential travel. There are few reported deaths but physicians are alarmed by the emerging pathologies. This may be the

Frankenstein epidemic that Health Authorities have long feared.”

We are still frozen and watching when the next announcement comes: “North American air space has been closed.”

That hits me like a body blow. The door of my home has been slammed shut. I grieve for Ashok’s warmth.

Our flight is cancelled, and an hour later, transatlantic jumbos and 380s begin to land. Flights originating from Frankfurt, Amsterdam, London and Rome turned back over the Atlantic and, low on fuel, slide to earth, one every four minutes, to line up on the tarmac until there is no room for more. Twenty thousand passengers wait inside those cabins, held for medical examination by panicked European Health authorities.

But we are free.

Back in the Skaldbreid, sex in the shower is a joyless rut under the rain of geothermal water that reeks of hydrogen sulphide. I taste it on Larus’ skin. It’s in our every pore. The rotten smell of Hades fills my mouth. I know then what Larus is.

At dinner in the restaurant, he picks apart his monkfish. I ask him again. This time he answers, “Yes, Erika. Eurogene Corporation has been developing—” he swills wine “—a biogenic neural shunt. We have designed it as a heritable genetic trait. It is more elegant than your clumsy American device. No crude implant.”

“What about humanity? And freedom?”

“We ran five years of animal trials without the smallest problem.”

“I came to Europe to escape.”

“Then, when human trials started, the subjects did not grow neural extensions, they grew... other things and their genes are scrambled. The vector has somehow mutated.”

“Why did you do this?”

He answers with Ashok’s words: “Because it is the future.”

“It’s the end of humanity.”

“We put them into Class Seven containment as soon as we realized they were contagious.”

“Eurogene did this, Larus? At the Institute?”

“No, human trials are conducted at our Spandau facility.”

“Surely there’s a cure? An immunization?”

“We do not have time.” He pushes away his plate. “We modeled the epidemiology. Before we can produce enough vaccine, all of

Europe will be infected. It will come here too.”

“So you ran?”

“Announcing it would have made a panic.”

“And this is better?”

Next morning, Larus returns to the hotel and tells me to pack. He’s found a small workboat. “I borrowed it. I have friends here. We will go to the Surtsey. We can be safe there.”

“Safe? Safe from what? From your friends?”

We chug out of Reykjavik, through harbour chop and into a running sea. The boat is old. It stinks of fish and diesel fuel. Larus is clumsy at the wheel. I stay out on the deck wrapped in a stained neoprene coat three sizes too big. I don’t want this. The ocean swell grows.

Three hours out, I’m shivering. We’ve come around the headland into the open sea. The waves descend on us like hills. We fall into valleys between rolling black walls, then surge to with the engine labouring. Larus runs from the wheelhouse and hangs over the side, throwing up. I’m queasy and the sight of Larus vomiting is enough: I heave my fishy breakfast back into the sea. I feel better. Larus doesn’t.

“Take the wheel,” he gags. “The autopilot doesn’t handle this.” He convulses, drooling white flecks, then points at the Nav display. “Just keep this heading.”

The boat pitches forward and noses down into a deep trough. Boxes and tins of food crash below the deck. He said that in six weeks the plague would have run its course. Six weeks on Surtsey, a cold, wet lump of volcanic ash with Larus and the gulls? The plague might not kill me. Larus said we weren’t infected, that we’d know by now.

The swells are mountainous. We ride up on a roller coaster and balance at the top. Larus lies on the cabin floor, his face ghastly white, sweater soaked, nothing left to puke but bile. Pity fails me. Iceland looms, grey and hazy to my left. The sky above is blue. I look to the right and imagine North America somewhere beyond that horizon. As we fall, weightless, into the canyon, I nudge the wheel. The Nav display tells me to turn east southeast. I look at soiled Larus, his mouth slack, his eyes screwed shut. How could I have let him touch me? I spin the wheel and the boat comes around west, facing toward North America,

wallowing as we angle through the swell.

Larus stirs.

The Nav display hoots angrily.

He opens his eyes and lurches to his knees. "What are you doing, Erika?"

"Going home."

"Don't be stupid." He's up and tearing me away. He pushes me back against the cabin door and spins the wheel. The boat comes around broadside to the waves and rolls on its side. Boxes and tins crash below. Something heavy falls. The engine coughs. Larus clings grimly to the wheel. I hang from a handrail. The cabin window is underwater. I think we've capsized, but slowly, the boat rights itself, and as we begin to roll to the other side, I brace against the door and, with both my feet and all my venom, I kick the back of Larus' legs. His knees buckle. He loses his grip and plunges headfirst. There's a numbing crack of bone against metal. His body drops, inert into the stairwell as the boat rolls back.

I clutch the wheel and reset our direction west.

Larus bleeds, unconscious.

The Nav display squeals and natters about fuel range.

We'll make it—or we won't; I don't care.

The swells are smaller now. The autopilot steers as I bandage unconscious Larus' scalp and tie his hands to the rail. Biscuits are scattered in the mess below deck. I step outside to eat. My hands are red with Larus' blood. Erika the Red. The air is cold and salty, the way it would have been a thousand years ago when Eric fled west. My air is laced with diesel fumes and I can't read the stars at night and I'm no hero.

Iceland is three days behind us. Greenland is close. Three days with little sleep, with the engine coughing, with Larus only rousing himself to crawl to the head, hardly caring if he lives. I untied him after we passed the point of no return. We'll get fuel there and push on to Labrador. As we crest a gentle swell, I glimpse a harbinger of land, an iceberg with waves breaking against its white flank.

The wind freshens.

Larus staggers out to check our fuel.



"Six hundred litres," he reports.

Two more days.

We'll make it into Nanortalik. Larus can get off there if he wants. I'm going home to Ashok. I'll join the new, unhuman race. I was wrong; *Homo sapiens* aren't noble; we're just savages. •

# The Carving of Hours

Corrine de Winter

In my dreams I am wrapped  
In 29 veils: scarlet, lavender,  
Peridot green and powder blue  
Pulled from the throat  
Of a dead magician.

On the smooth marble counter I dance,  
Peeling away layers of secrets  
Like ancient papyrus.  
My heels click like an incantation,  
A perfect timing in the flesh.  
Black skeletons of tulips fall  
With the vase and crash on the floor.

I am a deer emerging from the woods  
To feed out of your hand,  
To taste the salt of your skin,  
To kiss your wrist where the veins  
Are the colour of Neptune.

Move past cloudy holy water  
And lambs locked in stained glass fields.  
Wild papillon refuse to have me,  
To make a red mark in your Book of Hours.  
I know that you will save me in a jar,  
Use my limbs for kindling and later  
For sacred charms.

My idea of you is a pale bud  
Striving to unfold under a cheetah sun.  
God listens to every word and motion  
And makes a neat note of them.  
Now I sing a sticky lullaby  
Of how lust has a smell, a warning.

How death is a flowerbed of forget-me-nots.  
The life of a rose proves how beauty  
Disassembles petal by petal.  
So move past the stone gardens,  
The sewers of valentines stitched  
With fishing line and frozen needles.

A natural magic is pulled  
From the marshes and shallow water  
That causes even the holiest  
To cut their sky blue ties to heaven.

Move past the night blooming San Pedro cactus,  
Past wild horses, past your solitary hours  
Here the jungle gym is warm with innocent hands.  
And I dance for you, and all of this happens.  
A little sawdust settles in the bowels  
Of the grandfather clock.

You cannot feel the 9 worlds  
And each world within these worlds  
Rattling like dollhouses in the wind.  
Love calls you out from the black,

Blindfolding you for its sly fraternity.

All of this happens.

Leaden sparrows collect human hair  
To weave their nests, to warm  
The trembling eggs dreaming of flight.

Move past the hypnotic, the eyes  
Squirming like confusion.  
Move past these words.  
There is worshipping and songs rising  
From the rivers and white falls.

There is dancing and streets flooded with words.  
They spin in sidereal time, burning  
Like a bonfire of stars. •

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*You do not take my ship  
without my vengeance,  
I thought down at them.  
You do not take my home  
without cost.*

## **And its Noise as the Noise in a Dream; And its Depth as the Roots of the Sea**

Leah Bobet

In my dreams, in my deaths, in my depths, it all begins and ends with the sea.

• • •

### *One: First Disaster*

I felt it break inside me on the night *Olympic* started to shudder: something of blood and scale and cold brine that uncurled inside my belly, tasted the air, and decided that it was good indeed.

I stood anchored to the spot in the half-tidied cabin, hands sunk to the elbow in laundry and rumpled linen while it stretched and grew and blossomed; wondered why the feeling was so familiar, so strange. It could not be fear: I had never been in an accident before. All my years at sea the ships had flown straight and true, carving clean, constantly-healing lines to port and safety. This, the deck shaking under my feet and the alarm bells taking up a uniform wail; this was

surely an accident, and I was not afraid.

People shouted, screamed: something had hit the hull. I abandoned the laundry and ran through narrow halls, up stairs and ladders, up onto the deck. The stars twinkled cold and metallic above us, and the sea licked greedily at the wounded ship. I leaned over the side, my hand searching instinctive for something cold and metal and sharp to pierce our attacker's side, spill his blood and soul unto the waves. *You do not take my ship without my vengeance*, I thought down at them. *You do not take my home without cost*.

Something in the depths of the ocean heard my words, touched the serpent new-born in my soul, and the whole Atlantic drew back in surprise.

And then there were hands upon me: a deckhand—a soft-tongued Irishman named O'Reilly—pulled me back from the railing. "Miss Jessop," he said. "Get back from there. We've been hit by the *Hawke*."

I let him guide me back below, shaking visions out of my head. Laundry and harpoons mingling together, weight in my hand and beneath my trembling feet—one of these was wrong, I knew. "No, it was a whale, we must arm—"

He stared at me, uncomprehending. "Miss Jessop, Violet, it was the *Hawke*. A Navy ship. We're keeping the passengers in the dining rooms and turning for port immediately. You are needed with the other stewardesses."

I shook my head again, and a voice tickled the inside of my ear, came to me on the wind and echoed off the new seawater in my belly. *Ahab, Lief, Sindbad, Dutchman... we've found you. And we're going to kill you.*

• • •

I was born with eyes fixed upon the ocean, blue-grey storm-tossed eyes that captivate men's hearts. By this, despite flare-red hair, despite slim woman's body, the ocean knows me: my haughty eyes that know its soul, that mark me conqueror and conquered.

I ran away to the shipping lines and the salt breeze only days after father died. Mother didn't try to stop me: she too had the cry of seagulls nestled in her ears. She gave me a book on the day I sailed, a dream-book with a watertight case to keep it from ruin: interpretations, symbols, omens and signs. Mother was a superstitious sailor even when deathly



ill and land-bound for good. We had always understood each other.

I smiled hard at her, tossed it at the bottom of my trunk, and promptly forgot about it until *Hawke* put a gaping hole in my ship's belly and almost barreled through to her heart.

I dreamed for a month on shore about whales while they sewed up the wound in our ship, and woke up reaching for iron harpoons, eyes squinted against the spray, teeth clenched against fate and the cold and the shifting waves. I stood Navy-straight at the funerals, at the inquests, at the meeting where they handed me my new uniform and contract and introduced me to my new ship.

When they gave me that billet I dreamed of the sound of dice clattering on the floorboards every night, and each roll doom and calamity. The night before we boarded I opened the heavy book with a whispered prayer on my lips, and began to read my dreams.

• • •

## *Two: Second Disaster*

In the dream I stood on the shores where I was born, watching the waves foam and curl as they broke over the beach. They licked the sand, snapped at my toes, and receded. They murmured to me as they washed over the sand, voices approaching and receding with the water:

*We're getting closer, Mariner. Your woman's body has not fooled us. Your woman's heart has not fooled us. We will have you soon.*

I had to fight to wake, pushing towards the light of my cabin's white ceiling from depths where I couldn't breathe, couldn't speak, couldn't stand. The first thing I did was open the dreambook, pages creased and swirled with incantations in shorthand, corners curled from the moisture of my cheek at night. I sought the beach, the waves, noted the date down next to the entry before reading the interpretation. *Narrow escape from accidental injury*, the fading print declaimed. I shivered under regulation blankets and laid my head on the stiff ship's pillow. It couldn't happen. My new berth, my new ship, was the finest ever built. Since *Olympic* faltered, I'd grown smarter about the jobs I took: impregnable fortresses of ships, the sailing mountains of the White Star line. Omens or not, if the ocean wanted me there were

acres of steel and rivets and pipes between me and its belly; there was a castle between our skins, and it could lay siege at its leisure.

It was just a dream. Some things were just dreams.

I spat in the sea on my way to breakfast that morning.

• • •

My sleep that night was plagued by phantoms, ghost ships and dying seabirds and monsters snapping at my running feet. Voices wreathed through my mind, swirling like the mist wrapped around our tremendous hull. *We have you. We have you.*

Shaking from cold like polar dawn in my soul, from a lazy terror that caressed my bones like chill, I shrank back from them. *What do you want?*

*Rightful prey*, an ice-blue dragon hissed. *Cursed, self-cursed, you cannot hide.*

*Cursed*, I blurted, and the word was a puff of steam on the night air. Images assailed me: a six-armed, six-headed monster plucking sailors off my deck, deathly whirlpools, an albatross falling from the sky, the inside of a whale's gorge, the taste of land on bootsoles once every seven years, fleece that glittered metallic in the sun, the rattle of dice on foot-polished boards, a foolish, drunken vow to sail until the ends of the earth were found and conquered, and my own lips shaping the words.

The faces shivered and faded, reformed before me. *They might not recognize you, with your woman's body and woman's heart, but we do. We smell your soul, Mariner, Captain, sailor. We smell your soul, and we will fill your lungs with brine.*

I shivered, memory leaking slowly through the barriers of years and deaths and lives: the taste of wine stored too long in a wooden hull. Salt in stiff hair, in stiff clothes. Thirst, and mocking voices, and loneliness, and drowning, again and again drowning. *But there are no ends to the Earth. It's round. It never ends.*

The voices laughed, wicked, triumphant. *We will fill your lungs with brine and store your bones in the shells of ships. We will have our revenge for your scorn over, and over, and over again. We will have you for eternity.*

I woke up to shaking, hands rattling my body in its warm cocoon of sleep, the public address system blaring: *All hands on deck! All hands*

*on deck!*

The ship was shuddering underneath me; I could feel it even in my tiny cabin, in the bowels of that monstrous beast. Half-dreaming, I reached out for my iron harpoon and found the arm of my panic-eyed roommate. "What's happened?" I muttered sleepily, even though I already knew.

"Iceberg," she said, her eyes wide, her voice thin. "We've struck a berg."

I dressed, pulled together a few possessions—letters from my occasional beau Ned, my dreambook, my papers—and went up to the deck to do battle.

We stood at the bulkhead, all the stewardesses together, watching the passengers pace the deck, the women weep like stranded naiads as they were torn from their husbands and packed into lifeboats with screaming children.

I could see the berg from where I stood, and it was monstrous, gouging into the impenetrable ship. Above it, cresting the summit, stood three shadowy figures; female, long-haired, mouths open to the wind. A hint of song trickled back to my ears and before I could take a step I covered them, turned away. Nobody else looked at the half-fuzzed shapes; nobody else seemed to hear the music whose memory was tossing stormclouds over my brain.

The waves poked gently at the railing, and one man fell into another, near pushing him into the water. Fear turned into panic and argument, a stampede for the boats, pale-faced abandonment of friend and family and fellow. The ocean laughed, and I began to weep.

The officers motioned us forward into Boat 16, huddled us together into the tiny craft, and lowered us into the million grasping hands of the ocean. Arms still pressed atop my ears, eyes blurred with despair, I held tight to the wooden slats and thin ropes as we were abandoned to the waves.

That night I dreamed of skeletons piloting the ship through fields of ice: glittering glass mountains that offered no succour, no relief from parched tongue and empty belly and the dead eyes of the crew. It mingled with the real screams and shouts of the drowning passengers and crew. I floated in the lifeboat dozing, too afraid to sleep completely, my dreambook in my lap and my hand trailing in the ice-cold water.

The currents were nipping at my fingers, pulling me gently towards the deep darkness below. Singing, cajoling, drawing me down a path of strong voices and scaled tails and breasts as pale as seafoam.

Out of habit, out of exhaustion, out of cold and naught else to do, I resisted them.

• • •

We saw the lights of the ship after a numb, endless darkness: *Carpathia*. They hauled us up on deck, wrapped us in blankets and questions. What had happened? What had happened? I couldn't say; my mind was full of depths which had no words to name them. I was just a stewardess, and the ocean was hissing at me like a cheated cat. *We'll get you, Mariner. It was luck. We'll get you.* They hauled in the bodies the same way they hauled in the survivors; there were too many faces I knew that came up slack and limp, or not at all, and I would have retched over the railing, but I was too afraid to vomit in the ocean.

One of *Carpathia*'s officers saw the look on my face, and mistook it for something else. "Don't worry, ladies," he told us. "I'm sure White Star will get you another berth."

The thought almost made me pass out.

• • •

### *Three: Third Disaster*

The third time, I was almost prepared.

The rocking of the ship set jars to clinking, charts to fluttering; instruments slid across their tables, and the scaled thing in my gut awoke anew, and I knew. I smoothed my hands down the starched nurse's uniform and tried to control the trembling, felt my pocket for where I kept the dreambook, always on my person now. It could have been something normal: a torpedo, a mine, a U-boat. Bad steering, like they said the last one was, although I knew why it had happened and even with all that, couldn't feel whole and sane on land, needed the sea beneath my feet. On *Brittanic* we lived for such mishaps, for and against them, racing to the scene of trouble and tribulation, lifting the wounded out of the water and sending them back to the lines. My ship had never actually sailed before it had been pressed into medical

service. We were a luxurious, beautiful, state-of-the-art ship of modern war.

And if I'd learned anything, it was that there were no coincidences on the ocean.

*Iason, Odysseus, Agamemnon, Mariner... we remember you.* I staggered underneath the weight of the voices, pinching fruitlessly at the soft part on my calf. I was awake. I was awake. *Found, found, we'll have you this time. We'll chain your soul into Davy Jones' locker.*

"Nurse?" The fair-haired young soldier in the bed beside my station was frowning. "Nurse, you okay? What's happening?"

I nodded as the ship shuddered again, made a show of checking his chart, straightening his sheets. It wouldn't matter. He was dead. We were all drowned, now, pale corpses-to-be for them to find in a day or week or never. "You rest now, young man, and I'll see what's going on."

The steps to the deck were heavy; what now, what next? What more could I take? What more could I cause, now that death followed me like a shadow?

Into the clean Mediterranean breeze, and then there they were: six fanged heads rearing up from the already-listing hull, from the warm blue-green of the ancient Aegean. *Hey!* I called out to them. *Enough. Enough of this.*

All twelve chilly eyes turned my way. *Prey.*

*I didn't do anything to you,* I shot back. *These kids didn't do anything. This is a hospital ship. Leave them alone.*

*Immaterial. Rightful prey. Cursed one. You cheated us, made fools of us.*

The ship was taking on water, beautiful sparkling clean water; the doctors and nurses and sailors ran for the boats; the patients were lifted and transported, and their screams cut the balmy warm air as shrapnel shifted in their wounds.

There was a war on. This was ridiculous. I couldn't move.

*That wasn't me!* I cried out. *That was millennia ago! Why can't you just let it go?*

*We do not forget.* Skylla and Charybdis both smiled, baring phantom teeth. *And we are both older and wiser than our kin.*

I gritted my teeth. I gathered my skirts. They did not want the whole ship, after all. They had never wanted the ships.

The water roared up to meet me, and all I saw was blue.





Sucked under the ship's hull, yanked by the hair, and falling, falling... I struggled, trying hard not to scream: that would only send the water into my mouth, speed their work. The phantoms jeered around me, reached for me with coral-fingers full of dark things. *Prey. We have you. Prey.*

A crack on the head, blindingly painful, and something gripped my arm, yanked hard. I struggled, hysterical, even though I'd chosen this freely, chosen it well, done what I should have a long time ago.

I broke the surface sputtering and screaming aloud, hauled into a lifeboat by two strong-armed orderlies. I lay gasping and choking on the bottom of the boat for ten full minutes, listening to them slink away to the grottoes, for once my despair matching their own. *Close. So close.*

Their voices faded as the seawater dribbled from my ears.

My hands brushed down my ruined uniform, at the throbbing agony in my skull, and over my pocket.

The dreambook was soaked, salt-crusted, words just starting to run together. Ruined. The ship was broken as well: my patients starting to surface face-up into the warm wind. I wept until my throat ached with salt, and to my shame I could not tell you for which loss it was.

Of course, the dreams grew worse than ever.

I had cracked my skull on the ship's armor, fractured it right open. That must have let the sea-dreams in, although I knew enough to keep that thought private. The headaches were almost bearable when I was on the water, crushed me like a vise when I went too far inland. I belonged here. I was to be driven to the sea until the vow was fulfilled, and there would be not forgiveness, nor rest, nor amends made in the deeps. There would not be an end to it.

White Star paid me a pension to stay on dry land. I took it and went back to sea.

• • •

#### *Four: Wrestling with Disaster*

Two world wars, two peace treaties later, a clerical job and then a short-lived berth with the Royal Mail when the headaches threatened my sight—still they would not let me be. And I was getting old, older than my mother had ever been and older than I had ever expected to be. My bones were tired of the sea, aching for an old woman's leisure

and an old woman's pleasure: house and husband and afternoon tea, none of which I had ever owned.

My dreams, my saltwater blood, my blue-grey sea eyes gave me no choice. I signed on with a cruise ship, a stewardess as always, and turned my back to the countryside, where everything around me was silent and did not sing of love, of beauty, of mystery and death and great deeds done with dirty hands dipped in blood.

I was tired of the sea. But it was not tired of me. Until I found the ends of the earth, I was doomed to sail. I was doomed to live, and every child of Poseidon was bound to drown me.

The night before boarding, I dreamed of standing on the ship's deck while three seagulls winged and wheeled overhead. I craned my neck to watch them moving in perfect formation; all was still, dark, quiet.

When I woke up I opened my dreambook, ran my finger down the salt-stiffened, washed-out pages in the predawn light. *Death to come*, the entry said in faded letters. *Death to come*.

I snapped the book shut, and it crackled with a tearing, horrible sound. When I dared open it again, half the spine had split. Pages slid and fluttered out onto the bed, wrinkled and yellow with the sea, crumbling unto dust.

I shook my head, one slow saltwater tear working its way down my cheek. Alone. I was alone now, without charts or stars to guide me.

The next dream would surely be my last.

• • •

They weren't happy to take my resignation, not so close to sailing time. I stared the purser hard in the eye and turned up my chin. I was sixty-three years old, childless, husbandless, homeless, and my joints grew slower and more viscous every morning. It would just have to suffice.

They shook their heads, but there was nothing they could do. They couldn't force someone to board ship, merely cancel their contract. And so they did. I didn't mind at all. After all, I had no need for the reference; I'd sworn to myself that I would never set foot on a ship again, despite the pain and the strangeness of falling asleep to sparrows and trees. I would take my peace.

There was only one thing to do before I settled down.

I went down to the beach, past the bathers and children playing merrily in the tides; the very sight of that was enough to make me shudder. It was a balmy summer afternoon, the kind we had reveled in when I was a child myself. The sea lay at my feet snarling, waiting for a chance to strike and snap off a hand, or a leg, or all of me. I ignored it haughtily, taking slow sips from a glass of orange juice squeezed fresh at a beachside stall.

When the sun started to dip into the sea and the families packed up sandy picnics and left, I made my way down to the water.

It hissed at me in the setting sun, too much the colour of blood. I could see the ships massing on the horizon, small enough to look almost solid, and each one had a skull at its prow.

Slowly, each step firm and unshaking, I waded into the shallows. My skirts ballooned out on the water, bouncing with the waves, as I reached down and pulled up a handful of sand. It was slick, graininess made soft with the ceaseless fingering of the water, alive and magical instead of a brown lump of mud. I held it up high, water and seaweed and dirt dripping down my sleeve, and drew a hard line on the sea bottom with my shoe.

"This!" I cried. "This is the end of the earth! This line right here!"

The sea grew utterly silent.

I stared out over the water, daring it to do me in by riptide, by magic, by vow, or by artifice. Nothing happened.

Drop by drop, in memory and wanderlust and the sight that sees beyond, the sea trickled out of my veins and back to its home. For the first time ever, my blood felt warm inside me, the warmth of sun-baked fields and August wheat.

Tears stung my ears as saltwater fled them, and I dug in my pocket: in the blurry reflection of my White Star crew-issue pocket mirror, my eyes were turning a hazel-green.

I flung the lump of mud into the water and stomped my way ashore, but I knew better than to spit in the ocean.

• • •

It begins and ends with the sea, and I ended it with the sea.  
I think.

My dreams are silent, my nights dark as the sky over the ocean,

pricked with as many stars and satellites. I have ended with dreams, and I have ended with the ocean, and I have ended with fate: those are things for younger women, women who have no garden to tend or hens to keep or death to await in four small cottage walls. Maybe that's the way of things, of war, of exploration and toil and trouble. It takes a man's vow to begin them, and a woman's to end them.

Most of my generation, the sultans of the sea, are waiting for death now. The funeral trains grow longer daily: war heroes, socialites, survivors of the horrible violence wreaked by both human nature and the more traditional kind. Not all of them are waiting for death for the same reasons I am, setting out a teacup for him as if he were an old friend paying a call. For I ended it with the sea, but I won't know for sure until he arrives.

I look forward to discussing it on my terms. •

So much life had passed through  
this room, through this house.  
All of it left a mark.

## A Bit of the True Material

John Bowker

The window had been spun glass, original to the house, perhaps even older. Distorted, uneven in thickness, blocky shards from its heart glittered amid the dirty dishes in the kitchen sink. The thin edges lay scattered across the crumbs and grime on the counter but Sean ignored them as he went about the task of replacing the broken pane. It was the thick pieces from the center, the ones fattened by the light, which had their stories to tell. He ran his thumb along the knife-edge of a chunky trapezoid, drawing blood. So much life had passed through this room, through this house. All of it left a mark.

His daughter's kitchen had seen better days. His feet alternatively stuck and crunched upon her linoleum as he gathered together the window fragments around the remains of too many meals and too few sweeps of a sponge. She hadn't said how the window had broken, but he knew. It had offered a reflection in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Can you fix it?" she asked.

When he had given her the terrycloth robe, it had been a rich turquoise. The last few months had faded and frayed it down to the grimy hue of harbor foam. Any stains missing from the kitchen seemed to be contained within its threads and not for the first time



Sean cursed the name of his son-in-law.

"Have you ever found anything I couldn't fix? Compared to the time you dropped your marbles down the disposal this is nothing." He made a game attempt at a smile and was pleased to see a pale reflection from her in return. Using a catspaw, he lifted the firring securing the window into the frame and removed the empty panel.

"Kate, make me a clean spot will you?"

The tone of his voice snapped her from her lethargy. Moving efficiently, she swept an arm's width of bills and old newspapers off the table, creating a place to lay the empty frame. Kate had always helped him with these jobs when she was little. At one time he'd thought she might even learn the family business. Marrying Michael had been just one more bit of proof; she didn't have the eyes for it.

Refusing to dwell on his regrets, he removed the new pane of glass from between sheets of brown paper. Flawlessly clear and even, it was a blank slate, without memory, without a past. He could think of no better gift to offer his daughter.

As he fitted the pane into the frame, his thumb left a blood rosette on the wood. Kate took his hand and examined the cut.

"Dad, you're bleeding all over the place. Let me bandage that."

"Ah, it's nothing darlin'. Just a nick. If you're around glass and you're not bleeding, you're probably not working. You know that."

She did, of course. The thicket of red hair on Sean Fitzpatrick's forearms covered a multitude of old wounds, some small, some severe, all a result of his work. A lifetime in the air had sunworn him until his true age was impossible for the casual observer to guess, but to anyone who cared to look closer, the real history of his life was laid out in a tangled weave of callus and scar.

She ignored his protests, and recognizing protective instincts aroused, he sat mum and let her fuss over him, rustling through cluttered cabinets and overturning drawers to find bandages and ointment. With a concrete task at hand his daughter came alive, and Sean would wait forever to see that.

Just short of that forever, she returned, carrying a roll of tape, gauze, and some rubbing alcohol. Tipping the bottle against the gauze, she hesitated.

"This is going to sting a bit," she said.

He waved it away with his good hand. "When you love someone,

you do what you have to do, sweetheart. Even if it hurts." He sucked air through his teeth as the disinfectant hit the cut, but made no further comment as she turned his thumb into a bright, antiseptic snowball. When she was finished, he waggled the bandaged digit.

"The hospital couldn't have done better, and I should know. Nicky is lucky to have you as a mom."

Her face had brightened at the compliment; at the mention of her son, it clouded again.

"I wish I could do more for him. He's having such a hard time lately. He doesn't have any friends in the neighborhood." She gestured at the repaired window. "And now this. He won't talk to me. We can't afford it, but I'm thinking of sending him to someone for counseling."

Sean made a rude noise. "And what'll they tell you? His dad ran off and left you flat? You didn't bloody nurse him enough? Nah, darlin' the head doctors aren't what Nick needs right now. Is it still Michael? Or something else?"

The shadow of a wince crossed her face at the mention of her husband's name. She toyed with a package of cigarettes on the table-top, crackling the cellophane under her fingers.

"As stupid as it sounds, I think having to get glasses is what's got him down right now. Can you stand it? Everything that's happened in the last year and that's the end of the eight-year-old world." She sighed and put the cigarette pack down, unopened. "I'm scared, Dad. I don't know what to do with him."

"Well, the boy's got a career in washing windows, if it comes to that." Sean gestured at the new glass. "Clean as a whistle that one is now."

The flicker of a smile crossed Kate's face and she nodded, considering the kitchen with new eyes.

"There's that, isn't there? Before I go to bed, I'm going to take a flamethrower and see if I can make this place habitable again. Would you go talk with him? He loves you so much, maybe you can break him out of this funk."

Sean leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. "Better than the witch doctors, love. We take care of our own."

• • •

A Harry Potter poster adorned the door of his grandson's bedroom, the young actor's half-formed face framed by a pair of glasses intended to look institutional but probably costing more than an honest man's wages for the week.

"Tosser," Sean muttered under his breath as he knocked on the door.

No answer came from within. After the second knock, he took it upon himself to let himself into the room in a dramatic fashion, slamming the door back on its hinges. The room was dark, shades blocking the last of the late summer sunset. Sprawled on the carpet clutching a video game controller, his grandson was intent on something on the television screen involving leather-clad harpies, screeching guitars, and an undue amount of bloodshed. The carnage reflected in the lenses of the boy's new wire-rimmed glasses.

"Jesus wept and died, boy, if I'd known you were spending your summer in the house, I'd have put you to work myself." Sean knelt to ruffle his grandson's sandy hair with a rough hand.

"How're you doing, sprog?"

Startling the boy out of his zombie state had unfortunate consequences for the on-screen drama. The television made a disappointed bloop, like the misflush of a clogged toilet. Nick put the controller down on the carpet and looked up nervously.

"Hullo Grandpa."

"Take a seat, kiddo. We're going to talk about man-stuff a little." He sat on the bed and patted the space beside him.

The Fitzpatrick genes had never brooked resistance in the war of reproductive inheritance. Nick was the spitting image of Kate, a quarter-scale model of his daughter drawn by a Renaissance artist with a passion for cherubim. There was no sign of his father in him at all and Sean thanked what spirits were listening for small blessings.

"The window's all fixed," he said. "You should have come down so I could show you how. You're going need to know someday."

Nick hunched his shoulders up and down slightly in what might have been a shrug.

"Your mom's tellin' me you're having a hard time of it these days."

He shrugged again. Sean hated the gesture. His voice was measured.

"You planning to talk to me about it or do you intend to force me to hold you out the bloody window by your ankles?"

The boy shook his head. They sat in silence for a time. Then Sean decided to try another tack. Moving to the window, he freed the shade, letting the sunset play across the room.

"That's better," he said. Nick looked up, startled.

"Why did you do that?"

"Ach, boy. It's nearly bedtime and the future light is dying. You should leave the shades up. Make the most of it."

Nick stared warily at the window.

"What's 'future light'?"

"They don't teach you anything in those bleedin' schools, do they? You really don't know about past and future light? They've never told you about the glaes?"

Nick shook his head.

"Now that's a bloody shame. You with your new glasses and not knowin'." Sean shook his own head in sorrow for the failures of the modern world.

"Very, very sad, that. But if you don't want to talk, maybe it's time you went to bed. Go put on your pajamas."

"I'm not tired."

"And what," Sean asked pointedly, "does that have to do with anything?"

There was no room for argument in his tone, and Nick was bright enough to recognize it. He sulked down the long hall, and closed the bathroom door behind him.

"Aye, and brush your teeth," Sean called down the hall. "Your breath smells like peanut butter and dogshite sandwiches again." Alone, He spread his good hand across the cool vertical of glass, as the last glimmers of daylight cut through the pane and danced on his fingertips.

"I can only tell you this story when you're ready." Sean said quietly.

• • •

"You've got enough dirt behind your ears to grow potatoes, boy. Back to the sink with you."

The secret of telling a good tale lies in making the listening vastly preferable to the alternatives. Sean knew this well, and he made sure the child did everything by the book before beginning his story. Teeth

brushed, face washed, pajamas donned, after the third return to the bathroom for lapses in regimental inspection, Nick recognized the game and would not be deterred any longer. Hiding his pleasure at the sound of his grandson's laughing protests, Sean relented.

"Put your head on the pillow," Reaching down, he removed the wire-rimmed glasses from Nick's face and held them up to the small table lamp that was now the only light in the room. "And listen close, sprog, because I'm giving you gospel here."

"Glass is the world's most perfect stuff."

"Think about it. Nothing eats it, nothing much grows on it, nothing you're going to find in the course of your average stroll through the park dissolves it. You bury those specs of yours in the ground and a thousand years from now your heirs will still be able to read through 'em. Thing is, because of that, people think that glass is inert."

Sean paused and narrowed his eyes at the boy. "You know what 'inert' means?" Nick shook his head.

"It means that it stays the same, like you in front of the bloody noise-box. Anyway, that's bollocks. It changes. It's just only some of us can see it."

"The light coming through the window from outside, that's your future light. It knows things, brings the future like carrier pigeons from places you can't even imagine. Light travels a long way to get here, boy, and believe me it picks up some juicy tidbits on the trip. It tells those tales to the window when it passes through and they're all there waiting for someone to listen."

"At the same time though, light is hitting the window from inside the room too. Just like now, see?" He pointed to their reflection in the window.

"That's past light. Every moment that window has hung in this room is in there, waiting. Every time you sat here and picked your nose or swept your dirty socks under the bed or danced around in your bleeding underwear is in there, if someone had the stomach to look for it, which I for one most certainly do not. Just remember when you're a little older to pull down the shades, as a politeness to your old granddad, eh?" Sean shuddered in mock-horror. Nick giggled.

"The trick is learning how to listen to the glass, how to convince it to tell you those stories. Some people think you've got to break the window to do it, shatter it into pieces, grind it into dust. That's for



tossers. Someone who really knows their stuff could read the glaes of every window in the house before they wiped their feet on your mat." He handed the glasses with exaggerated care back to Nick.

"And all the best ones wear glasses. A bit of the true material in front of your face and in front of your eyes every moment of the day. I've met a lot of those boys in my day, and they're a smart lot, let me tell you. Real gentlemen. They like churches for reasons that have nothing to do with the sermons."

Nick turned the glasses over in his hand dubiously.

"Glass really tells stories, grandpa? Or are you just taking the piss with me again?"

"I didn't say all, just most. And whoever taught you that expression is a terrible influence."

"You did."

"As I said then. Don't use it around your mother or I'll be missing a lot of Sunday dinners." His voice lost its jocularly and took on a warning tone. "You've got to watch out for mirrors though. Duplicitous things. They'll tell you whatever you want to hear and not a word of it you can trust. You start listening to mirrors and you'll start believing all manner of idiocy."

"Grandpa?"

"Yes, sproglet?"

"The kitchen window... I saw something."

"I know. And damned sorry I am that you did too." Sean stood and closed the bedroom door.

"It's time for me to tell you about your dad."

• • •

The kitchen wasn't quite spotless, but it wouldn't put a man off his feed either. Sean was glad to see his daughter was still awake as he came downstairs and gathered his tools. Looking up from scrubbing the sink, she smiled at him.

"That sounded like it went well. What did you tell him?"

"The usual. Kids stories, a dash of the old country bullshite. He's a good kid, that one. He'll be okay." He packed a flat-bladed putty knife into the splintered confines of the old plywood toolchest and closed the lid.

"Dad—"

He interrupted before she could finish.

"It's going to get better, sweetheart, I promise. You just call and I'll be here." Taking her into his gnarled arms, he hugged her fiercely. Then he hefted the toolchest up off the floor and let himself outside into the night.

• • •

The pond was not a short ride, from his home or Kate's. He drove in the midsummer darkness alone with his thoughts, the pick-up's headlights cutting tunnels through the mist rising up off the still-warm blacktop. Once outside the limits, the city's waste light diminished, but the moon had risen, high and full, bright enough to drive by. He switched off his lights and turned down a narrow dirt track that terminated on the bank of the quiet water.

Standing at the pond's edge, Sean removed the glass shard from his overalls. It lay in his palm, shining softly with reflected moonlight as he slowly clenched his fist.

*The gas burner flame casts shadows in the darkened kitchen, glowing blue against the spoon Michael grips tightly in a pair of pliers.*

*"I don't know about this, Michael." Kate's voice, worried.*

*"You said you wanted to try it, Kate. It's incredible, trust me. You'll like it." He switches off the burner with his free hand. "It's like being god for a little while."*

*He fumbles the needle and expertly draws off a bit of the caramel colored fluid. Testing the tightness of the band around her arm, he kisses her softly. "I love you, Kate. I'd never hurt you."*

*"Trust me."*

Sean opened his hand, the glass beaded with moonlight and black droplets of his blood. With a violent sidearm motion, he sent the fragment skipping across the water, its passage shattering the moon's reflection into ripples that broke unseen on every shore of the pond.

"Bloody hard choices, Michael," he said. Turning his back on the black water and the body of his son-in-law, he returned to the truck.

• • •

Kate checked on Nick before she went to bed. It was a ritual she

had begun even before her husband had left, one that had even more importance to her now. It was long after midnight when she gently opened the door into his room, but in the soft spill of the hall light, she was surprised to see Nick was still awake. Propped up on pillows, his thin arms folded behind his head, he stared out the window.

"Hey kiddo," she said quietly. "Can't sleep?"

Nick shook his head.

"Did talking with Grandpa make you feel any better?"

"A little. He told me a story."

Kate sat on the bed. "He used to scare the heck out of me with those stories until grandma made him stop. Grandpa sees things a little differently from most people."

Staring at the window, Nick said softly "I was ready to hear this one."

Kate smiled and smoothed his bangs away from his forehead. "Well, I guess I never was. Don't let him give you nightmares."

Struck by the look of sadness on her son's face, she leaned down and hugged him fiercely. She clung tight until he began to squirm with impatience, the childish defense against the adult predilection for mushy behavior. Breaking the embrace, she kissed his cheek.

"You know I love you, don't you sweetheart? I'll always take care of you. No matter what. Do you know that?"

Nick didn't answer, but as she turned to leave, his voice came quietly from the darkened room.

"I know," he said. "And I'll take care of you too."

"I promise."

• • •

Sean's house waited dark and silent as he pulled into the driveway and he let the house sleep, leaving the lights off as he slowly climbed the stairs to his bedroom, his body aching with the day's exertions.

He removed his accessories one by one in a ritual that had become habit over the years. His watch went first, followed by his wedding ring, the band and links of abused, work-scarred gold clinking into the china saucer on his dresser. He undressed and neatly folded his clothing into the hamper. He knelt quietly for a moment by his bedside in a manner the nuns had instilled in him and the years had not managed to wash out. His ablutions done, he

made his final preparations before sleep claimed another day.

Lifting his hands to either side of his head, he closed his eyes and pressed his thumbs gently against his eyelids. He could feel the spheres roll in the sockets and lights flared in his skull as he pressed more firmly. First one, then the other, the milky orbs popped wetly from under the lids and into his waiting palm. Slick and warm with his body heat, he held them carefully, hearing them sing against each other in his hand.

"A bit of the true material, boy. Right in front of your eyes," he whispered.

Placing one, then the other onto a square of velvet in the cigar box on his bedside table, he closed the lid, putting Nick and Kate, the memories of their past and their possibilities yet to come, away for another day.

There is only so much a man can know about the future, but better days were ahead. There had to be. Sean had lain awake many nights with his burdens, unable to sleep. There were nights he questioned. There were even nights he prayed.

But that night, in a darkness morning would not break, he dreamed of cathedrals. •

Mary-Ann hated to negate Quent's sense of artistic accomplishment, but frankly she was appalled. Alcohol was just so... so... *industrial*.

# The Art of Solitude®

Mark Shainblum

Mary-Ann became desperate when Quentin decided to take up bartending. He was already so fiddly and noisy around the flat that she'd been unable to paint anything of value for weeks, just endless doodles and lifeless figure studies. Bills were starting to pile up, and worse, the frustration was spilling over into migraine headaches that even Hippocrates® couldn't do anything about.

If only the lovable little bastard could pick up some less bothersome hobbies; but no, he was obsessed with mid-20th century pastimes, and apparently they didn't do anything quiet in those days. First it was slot car racing sets, then it was that infuriating radio-controlled airplane; with a real, internal combustion engine no less! That cost her a pretty-penny in fines when Ecos® caught up to them, to add insult to injury. Then it was—what was it?—Boardskating? Outline skating? Something like that.

And now, bartending. Quent wandered endlessly back and forth across the flat, shaking and stirring up his horrible concoctions, spilling them all over the place and leaving them where the dogs could get at them. Mary-Ann hated to negate Quent's sense of artistic accomplishment, but frankly she was appalled. Alcohol was just so... so... *industrial*. Nobody with a scintilla of self-respect poured that paint



remover into themselves anymore. A single 20MinuteOrgasm® could keep Mary-Ann going for a week, and it left nothing behind but a pleasant buzz. (Unlike her one-and-only experience with a hangover, which left her with a savage desire to shave her tongue.)

It took time for desperation to turn into determination, but everything crystallized on a particular Wednesday morning some nine weeks into Quentin's obsession. Mary-Ann was a nervous wreck. Her hands shook, her eyelids twitched, and when she tried to warm up with some simple sketches, she ended up with nothing but a pad's worth of crumpled drawing paper and a depleted stock of precious wood-and-graphite pencils. Kicking her portfolio over in frustration, Mary-Ann stormed out of the flat, cursing history, art, science and civilization with equal venom.

Quentin was having a far more creative day. While exploring a cache of 30-year-old ghost memories he'd picked up cheap at a SoulAuction®, he rediscovered the long-lost recipe for Margaritas. Conscious of the moment's historical import, he mixed up a ten-litre batch in a state of near-religious ecstasy, and then reverentially doled it out into a series of ten one-litre modernist glass pitchers from the lost empire of Ikea. Using a light-meter, a homemade *lo pan* and an ancient paperback *feng shui* guide held together by hope and a cheap Scotchfield®, Quentin placed one pitcher in every room of the flat, aligning them perfectly with the chi flow and the predominant light source, whether natural or artificial. One pitcher went on the mantle in the living room, another displaced the coffeemaker on the central kitchen-island, and a third was set up on a card-table in front of the picture window in the sight-and-sense room.

Mary-Ann's studio presented a particular problem, since it was virtually bare except for drawing table, easel, art files and various bits and pieces of scattered artwork. After experimenting with numerous placements on the art files, Quent shrugged and placed his offering right on the floor, sacrificing some of the chi flow in favour of perfect alignment with the sunlight streaming in from the window. When Quent left, seized by a new, almost sexual urge to make highballs, Mitzi the cocker spaniel eagerly bounded into the studio. Mitzi was, by this time, much shakier than usual and had taken to obsessive late-night barking at non-existent intruders, so it was understandable that she was oblivious to the artistic integrity of Quentin's installation. She

knocked the pitcher to the floor—soaking a series of old nude pencil sketches Mary-Ann had dug out earlier—consumed Margarita mix and nudes alike with a commendable lack of discrimination, and then became violently ill all over the scattered contents of Mary-Ann's portfolio.

Mary-Ann screamed hysterically for three minutes, paused for breath, and decided that some of the acrylic paintings were salvageable, but the watercolours were all ruined; including the one she'd refused to sell to the Venezuelan billionaire for a tenth-share of the Big Finger Mine on Ceres.

She tried to get angry with Quentin, but it was impossible to lay down the law with a history-player. They lived their lives only barely connected to the three-dimensional world of tables and chairs and pissed-off girlfriends. Quent kept most of his right-brain busy with a cadre called the Fooles of Time, which had at least 30,000 members synched in real-time Pseudo-Telepathy®. If she yelled at him, or threatened him, or simply demanded that he clean up after himself, he'd just drift further and further into synch-up with his cadre-buddies. A big, stupid grin would spread across his face and he'd hold up his index finger in that universal "one second" gesture. Then he'd wander off and conveniently forget they'd ever begun to have a fight. Short of throwing him out on his ass, there was nothing she could do, because he could always retreat to the House of 30,000 Flakes.

Throwing Quent out wasn't on the agenda. Mary-Ann despised herself for her weakness, but she acknowledged it. Hippocrates® had warned her repeatedly that people with her personality type (bass dominant, with co-dependent and obsessive-compulsive alto sharps) had to be extremely cautious about initiating relationships, but here she was. Short of getting a Mindtuck®—which she would never do for fear of what it might do to her art—it just wasn't going to happen. Getting Quent to heel wasn't going to happen either. She'd just have to make some space for herself in a different way.

So Mary-Ann did some research, made a few discreet inquiries and eventually invited four salespeople call on the flat: Two women, one man, one undefined. She liked Undefined, but his-and-or-her offering was more like a crippled industrial tool than a consumer product, and way too expensive for Mary-Ann's needs. The man was just plain obnoxious, a common failing of male salespeople since the dawn of

time, and she stopped listening after he used the word “incredible!” for the fourth time in a single sentence. The woman from SpaceOfOnesOwn® did her best, but she and Mary-Ann both knew that her line was borderline obsolete, so by default, Mahrahni Narayan from SingularityPlus® Distribution walked out of the flat with an appreciable chunk of Mary-Ann’s liquid assets.

It took Mahrahni and a servicer the better part of a day to install the fold-heart, yet another day for the power company to approve Mary-Ann’s application for additional drawing privileges, and she wasted a further half-day with a SingularityPlus® trainer who insisted on demonstrating every single useless bell-and-whistle.

“I’m not planning a military operation,” she insisted, when the trainer whipped out a remote control and started to demonstrate the multi-modal features. “It’s just going to be me and my art in a single, stable plane.”

“Sorry ma’am,” said the trainer, shaking its head. “Liability issues. I’m obliged to demo every Solitude® feature at least once.”

“Liability?” said Mary-Ann, her eyes narrowing. “Why do you need to worry about liability?”

“No worries, ma’am,” said the trainer in a soothing voice. “Using your Solitude® fold-heart is safer than taking a shower.” It held up the remote control and flipped a safety cover open to reveal a big red button. “And in the statistically insignificant eventuality of fold-failure, all you need to do is press the panic button and you’ll be expelled back to your prime point instantly.”

Mary-Ann tried to press the issue, but the trainer artfully and dogmatically steered the conversation back to the fold-heart’s multi-modal capabilities and thematic plane filters. Mary-Ann dozed with her eyes open through most of the spiel, seeing shapes and tasting colours while the trainer droned on and on about superstrings and colloidal universes and customizable faceplates in a variety of high-fashion styles. It was only when it pressed the remote control into her hands and wiped a tear from its eye that her attention snapped back to the flat.

“Ma’am, on behalf of myself and SingularityPlus® Distribution, it has been an honour and a privilege to train you in the use of your new Solitude® fold-heart. Please dispose of this trainer responsibly.” The trainer went stiff and imploded to the floor with a newspaper-

crumpling sound, and Mary-Ann absently scooped it up and tossed it into the recycling bin. With eyes full of wonder, she wandered over and stroked the fold heart's shiny, chromium surface.

"Solitude," she whispered, as the unit powered up and twisted local time-and-space like a soft pretzel. With a gentle pop, the stepthrough opened and Mary-Ann peered into her own private universe. Ignoring her brain's urgent warnings that she was falling into a vicious whirlpool from a great height, Mary-Ann delicately probed the stepthrough with her fingertips. Then, taking a single sharp breath, she threw her whole body into it like a child bellyflop-ping into a swimming pool.

The sensation was like a 20MinuteOrgasm® without the orgasm. Or the twenty minutes, for that matter. The phrase "swimming in liquid velvet" popped into Mary-Ann's head, but even that was a miserly, inaccurate metaphor. The closest she ever got to describing it to herself was *horny*, though not in any traditional sense of that blunt Anglo-Saxonism. It was an aching, spiritual horniness that demanded consummation in paint and brush. Hastily, Mary-Ann stepped back to her studio and frantically fed her drawing table, easel, art files and supplies to the stepthrough, before bellyflopping back in herself. Then, completely without her traditional warm-up anxiety or artistic tailchasing, she threw herself at her latest canvas like it was a lover. Every brush stroke and every conjoining of colour and tone and shape made her spirit writhe in aesthetic ecstasy. Her control was sure, her brush became an extension of her fingertips and nerve endings, and her soul sang. *This* was art! This was the way it was always supposed to be!

Mary-Ann thanked God for Mahrani Narayan and SingularityPlus® and her new Solitude®, and then she forgot them all in reverse chronological order as the spirit welled up within her and the canvas became the all and the everything.

Mary-Ann took to running her Solitude® 24 hours a day, seven days a week. She was invulnerable, fortified against alcoholic dogs and whatever else the world could throw at her by superstrings and quarks and gluons and the funky fabric of space/time itself. She wasn't sure Quent even noticed. Lately, he pretty much ignored her even when she occupied the *same* space/time continuum.

On prime side her studio had for all practical purposes become an empty room, and when in stepthrough, she and everything about her

existed only as theoretical quantum constructs from Quent's point-of-view, no more substantial than Puck or Prospero or an idle daydream. Of course, from her perspective, *Quent* became the theoretical quantum construct and she and her art were the only reality. Mary-Ann liked that. She reveled in the notion that art and reality weren't really that different after all. The abstract worlds inside her paintings were just as real as the abstract universe she created them in.

Except. There was always an except. The fold-heart mechanism itself existed on both sides of stepthrough. It had to, anchoring Mary-Ann's abstract plane to prime and allowing passage between them. Mahrhani had assured her repeatedly that the Solitude® was rated for deep-space use and could withstand the explosive output of a Class 5 reaction drive. Unfortunately they had never tested it for the explosive output of two alcoholic dogs and a PT®-addled history player. Quentin, completely forgetting the unfortunate Margarita experience (and, possibly, Mary-Ann's entire existence) decided that the consummation of *his* artistic ambition required an original 1970's disco bar set, complete with chromium-legged barstools, black mini-fridge and white leather couches. The goods were so bulky, historically rare and relatively expensive that the archaeoauctioneers entrusted them to a human deliverywoman instead of a deliverer. She arrived behind schedule, harried and apologizing profusely, steadying a huge, tarp-covered fledge with her fingertips as it bobbed on its lifting field. As it turned out, the deliverywoman, whose name was Valerie, was over 30 minutes late for an illicit midday tryst with her lover, and she gratefully accepted Quentin's assurances that he knew how to operate a fledge. She handed him the remote control, pointed out the big green "On" button and fled, promising to return for her equipment later that afternoon.

Of course, the only remotes Quentin knew how to operate belonged to toy airplanes manufactured in the mid-20th century, and he squinted in confusion at the fledge's unfamiliar controls. Experimentally he eased a tiny red joystick forward a millimeter, and the fledge lurched. Grinning triumphantly, Quentin pushed the joystick to the end of its track, and briefly lost consciousness as a roaring fist of displaced air slammed him against the wall. The fledge accelerated down the hallway at an appreciable fraction of the speed of sound, sucking a comet's tail of throw-rugs, lamps, end-tables, sofa cushions,



dogs and dog dishes in its wake. It passed through the doorframe and south wall of Mary-Ann's studio as if they were nothing more than a light mist, but the fold-heart was more resilient, as promised. It bonged like Big Ben as the fledge struck it a glancing blow, and it bonged again as emergency overrides kicked in and the fledge's gravitic field reversed itself. Floorboards splintered, walls groaned ominously and windows exploded from their frames as the fledge shed its enormous acceleration in a matter of seconds. A vicious whirlwind spit debris and loose furnishings in every direction, bouncing Mitzi's ceramic water bowl off Quentin's forehead and shocking him into sensibility.

"Holy shit," he muttered as he staggered down the hallway, leaning on the wall for support.

"Holy *shit!*" wailed Valerie the deliverywoman when she returned for her fledge an hour or so later. "You told me you knew how to work these things!"

Quentin—who was sitting cross-legged on the floor in the middle of Mary-Ann's studio—shrugged, and that shrug spoke volumes. Valerie quietly thanked Zoroaster, Mithras and the Buddha that her kind and sensitive (if somewhat married) lover would *never* shrug at her that way.

"I have a vernissage starting at seven in this room," said Quentin. "What are we going to do?"

"*We?*" demanded Valerie.

"Your fledge."

Valerie hissed in annoyance, but the little shrugger had a point. Employer and union alike would have her head if they found out she left a dangerous piece of gravitic equipment in the hands of a customer. Muttering under her breath, she went downstairs and got four servicers from her truck, and then placed a furtive call to a friend in her employer's building-supply division.

The servicers wept for joy when they found out they'd have an entire afternoon of heavy manual labour, but all Valerie could think about was balancing her account books for her dispatcher. "I'm adding the servicers, the supplies and three hours of my time to your bill," Valerie told Quentin as they helped the servicers paint and spackle the reconstructed walls. "I don't know what I'm going to say about where I've been all afternoon."

When Quentin shrugged again, Valerie briefly considered whacking him in the head with her PaintPolarizer®, but she decided the repercussions wouldn't be worth the momentary satisfaction.

Three hours turned out to be a wildly optimistic estimate. It was well past 6:30 by the time they'd finished walls, windows, doors and floors, and the servicers expired and imploded before they could get around to fixing the flat's damaged furniture.

"I told you we should have done the furniture before setting up the bar," said Valerie.

"Good enough," said Quentin, shrugging and ushering her hastily to the door. "My guests are going to be here any minute!"

Valerie was basically a decent soul, and she was planning to mention the ominous dent in the expensive-looking piece of electronic equipment sitting in the corner of the studio. She was even prepared to come back another day with a specialized electronics servicer to make sure her ass was covered, but that last shrug was the final straw. With a withering glare, she collected her stuff and left, making sure to slam the door as she went. Quentin, predictably, shrugged again and promptly forgot all about her.

Two hours later, with bar up and running, and a flat full of drunk Fooles of Time to cheer him on, Quentin took a deep breath and steeled himself. This would be the crowning moment of his career, a historical performance installation they'd be talking about for years to come. He'd be a legend!

"Attention everyone!" he said, shouting over the din. "If you'll all take out your programs, we'll begin."

There was a moment of confusion and rustling as the Fooles of Time collectively withdrew their programs, printed on a single sheet of lime-green paper.

"Welcome to 'Drunk Centenary!'" Quentin shouted, to whoops of glee from the audience. "One hundred different cocktails and mixed drinks, some supposedly lost to history! One drink for every year of the 20th century, all mixed to perfection in one hundred minutes or less!"

The crowd roared its approval, and Quentin set out to make his place in history. He was blind, deaf and dumb to everything except the glasses and ingredients directly in front of him. He simply didn't notice the high frequency whine coming from the normally silent

fold-heart, nor the tiny but ominous whirlpool of distorted space spinning languidly in the air above it. Several Fooles of Time actually *did* notice the whirlpool but, loathe to interrupt Quent during his moment of glory, collectively decided to blame it on the bottle of 200-year-old single malt they were sharing.

"Harvey Wallbanger!" shouted the crowd as Quent mixed his fourteenth drink and tossed it back. "Long Island Iced Tea!" they shouted 20 minutes later on number fifty-seven. Quent had given up trying to drink everything he mixed and had taken to stacking the drinks on the bar. "Earthquake!" they shouted, as he tossed ice, whiskey, gin and Pernod into a tall glass, for number fifty-eight.

Forgotten in the tumult were Mitzi the cocker spaniel and Raymond the Belgian Shepherd. The dogs were in the final, frenzied stages of the canine DT's and were feeling neglected and unloved, so to blame them for what happened next would be unfair. It was Quent, after all, who introduced them to the demon drink, and it was Quent who left dozens of undefended cocktails scattered across the bartop. Thousands of years of domestication evaporated in an instant as the two mighty hunters leaped, knocking the bar ass-over-teakettle and spilling delicious, enticing alcohol all over the floor. Quentin went down with the bar, but history-player instincts overrode panic and he maintained his grip on the irreplaceable 20th century *glass* glass in his hand. Its contents, however, were launched into a beautiful, slow motion parabola that reminded two cinephile Fooles of a scene from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. (Unfortunately no one else in the room had ever watched a pre-PT® motion picture, so the metaphor was mostly lost.) The free-falling globule of liquid Earthquake intersected with the half-invisible whirlpool of distorted space hovering over the fold-heart, and that's when bad things started to happen.

Mary-Ann was breathing hard, and deciding that her aesthetic horniness and down-and-dirty *real* horniness weren't all that different after all. Her Silk Road canvas was all but done, but she couldn't stop herself from adding featherlight touches of paint here, there and everywhere. It felt like foreplay with the best lover she'd ever had. Her eyes couldn't encompass the entirety of the Silk Road's glory, and the sensations spilled over into her arins, legs, breasts, stomach, and yes, her clitoris. It felt like she was going to have the kind of orgasm that would put the 20MinuteOrgasm® people right out of business.

Unfortunately, the inconsistencies between the physical laws of Mary-Ann's private universe and prime plane—the same inconsistencies that made making art an endless, quasi-erotic joy—also had a bit of a practical downside. These became readily apparent when a fist-thick stream of badly mixed cocktail smashed into Mary-Ann at fire hose pressure, forcing all the air from her lungs in a single, startled "Whoof!" and accelerating her right into her prized canvas.

When Mary-Ann's senses cleared, she found herself treading Earthquake less than a bare meter from the theoretical "ceiling" of her theoretical studio, the Silk Road awkwardly propped above her head in both hands. The rest of her studio—her art, her *life*—had vanished under thousands of litres of cocktail.

"I'll fucking *kill* him!" she screamed, and then sadly realized that she was far more likely to die at Quentin's hands first, however unintentionally. She spit Earthquake and grimaced. The little bastard never *meant* to hurt anyone, but then, neither did a hurricane or a rampaging swarm of fire ants. People got hurt anyhow.

Mary-Ann looked up at the canvas propped above her head and then down at the spot where her drawing table should be. The liquid beneath her continued to roil, and the "ceiling" was getting ominously closer. She sighed deeply, once, and heaved the Silk Road into the drink. It splashed and floated away like a surrealistic bath toy, trailing an oily rainbow in its wake. Mary-Ann sighed again, took a deep breath and dove. She'd never been a strong swimmer even in water, even in a universe which obeyed the physical laws she knew, so the dive was nightmarish beyond description. Alcohol burned her eyes, forcing her to navigate blind in a realm where her notions of time and distance were already quaint folktales. She dove endlessly, for what seemed like hours, before her hands touched the surface of her drawing table. Her lungs finally started to notice the lack of oxygen as she scrabbled frantically at the elastic tie-downs in the pencil tray. One after the other her hands found her pencil case, her makeup case, her tubes of acrylic and stabylic paint and her precious chunks of AuthorizedCharcoal®. She was seconds from complete blackness when she felt the smooth form of the Solitude® remote. At the last instant, the cobalt-blue customizable faceplate Mahrani Narayan had thrown in as a goodwill bonus almost cost Mary-Ann her life when it jammed the quick release cover over the panic button. However, in a classic (some might say

*stereotypical*) burst of terror-induced superstrength, Mary-Ann ripped it free and stabbed the big red button underneath.

"Banana Cow!" roared the crowd, convincing Mary-Ann she wasn't dead. No one in heaven or hell would ever say "Banana Cow," of that she was certain.

"Cuba Libre!" they roared again as she rose slowly to her knees, her alcohol-soaked clothing squelching around her as she moved.

"Pink Flamingo!"

Mary-Ann opened her eyes experimentally. She was looking at the floor of her studio, her real studio. There was something wrong with the carpet, though, beyond the fact that it was soaked with alcohol. The colour and the texture seemed off, different, somehow.

"Creamy Fizz!"

She looked to her left. Her drawing table, upside down and snapped cleanly in two, lay next to her.

She turned to her right. An amorphous, papier maché-like blob slowly leaked watercolour into the strange carpet. Mary-Ann prodded it with her finger. It *might* have been several dozen watercolour paintings, once.

"Lady Finger!"

Mary-Ann struggled to her feet, feeling the Earthquake mixture run down her body. For an instant, she focused on nothing but the clammy tickle of a single drop as it flowed between her shoulder blades, down the small of her back and into the crack of her ass. For a single, endless instant, there was nothing in the universe but that one, infinitesimal drop on its doomed voyage to her anus.

"Pollyannabel!"

"And speaking of assholes," Mary-Ann muttered to herself, finally able to absorb the whole scene. Quentin was sitting cross-legged on an unfamiliar piece of furniture. Mary-Ann didn't know what it was, but it was clearly overturned and listing at an odd angle. The spot where Quent was sitting had never been intended for that purpose, she was sure. He was surrounded by cross-legged people sitting on the floor around him, completely oblivious to the piles of broken glass and spilled alcohol surrounding them. Quentin was holding a tall glass to the sky like an Olympic torch, while behind him, a tire-sized whirlpool of distorted time/space spun languidly above the fold heart.

"Sweet Martini!" chorused the whole crowd as Quentin up-ended



the glass into Mitzi's waiting water dish. She eagerly lapped it up as Quentin quickly poured new ingredients into the glass from small collection of miniature liquor bottles. The whirling tire was now large enough to fit a cement truck.

"Mr. Man Cocktail!" shouted the crowd.

"What the *fuck* is happening here?" Mary-Ann roared. One or two of the cross-legged people languidly turned their attention to her. Quentin, notably, did not.

"Sssshhh," said one of them unsteadily raising her forefinger to her lips. "This is a historical moment."

Quentin's hands moved faster and faster, they were almost lost in a blur of motion.

"Rose of England!" shouted the crowd, as the whirlpool spun faster and faster.

"Quentin! For God's sake!"

Quentin looked up at her and smiled, blankly. "Just a sec, honey. Only two more to go."

"Do you have the slightest idea what you've done to me?"

Quentin shrugged, and Mary-Ann's lips compressed into a thin line.

"Mitzi," she said, whistling softly. "Here girl!"

Mitzi looked up at her. Mary-Ann whistled again. Unsteadily, Mitzi bounded from the overturned bar and staggered towards her.

"Gin Milk Punch!"

Mary-Ann watched as the spinning whirlpool silently expanded, swallowing Quentin, his overturned bar, and all his acolytes. Mary-Ann pressed a button on the remote control she still clutched in her right hand, and heard the joyous roar of "Gin Sin!" just before the whirlpool winked out of existence.

Mary-Ann wandered over to the fold heart and noticed, in a distant kind of way, that she was unhooking the main power supply. Mitzi pawed at her feet and whined, so Mary-Ann scooped her from the floor and allowed her to lick her face. It was like getting a sponge bath with a warm alcohol wipe.

She drifted out of the studio, clutching Mitzi close and absently wondering if she still had the Venezuelan billionaire's address. Maybe he'd settle for a copy. •

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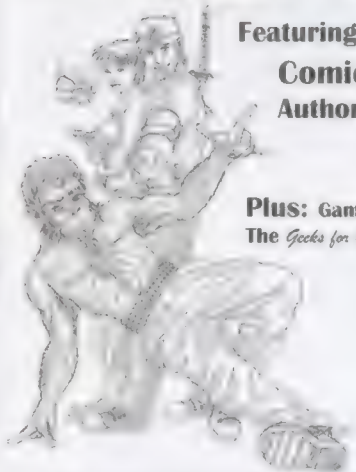
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- Your entry must be typed on 8 1/2 x 11 white paper and the piece(s) must be triple-spaced. Please do not use double-spaced lines or double-spaced margins.
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# about our contributors

**Leah Bobet** lives in Toronto, where she studies Linguistics and works in Canada's oldest science fiction bookstore. Her work has appeared recently in *The Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy for Teens*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Realms of Fantasy*. She keeps stuff at [www.leahbobet.com](http://www.leahbobet.com).

**John Bowker** always wondered what his grandfather kept in that old cigar box. A graduate of the Odyssey Writers' Workshop, he lives and writes by a hundred-year-old window overlooking a pond just outside of Boston.

**Derek Künsken:** For a few years, Derek Künsken built genetically engineered viruses to study possible treatments for cancer, but then switched careers to work with street children in Honduras. For five of the last six years, he has been in Colombia and Cuba, working for the federal government. He now works in Ottawa and lives with his wife and son. *Tidal Maneuvers* is his first published story.

**Robert Lake** is a winner of Event's 2005 creative non-fiction award. He has published speculative fiction in *Descant*, *Pagitica*, *Nashwaak Review*, *On Spec* and elsewhere. *Fiddlehead*, *Dalhousie Review*, *Prairie Fire* and others have published his "realistic" fiction. He's not quite sure what kinds of fiction his scholarly papers and journalism are.

**Stephen Leclerc** is the author of over a dozen short stories. His fiction has appeared in *Storyteller*, *Book of Dark Wisdom*, *Thirteen Stories*, and *Fantasque*. His zombie screenplay, "*The Diary*," has been filmed by CAMmotion Pictures and was nominated for Best Screenplay in the 2005 Chicago Horror Film Festival. Stephen lives in Burlington, Ontario with his wife Diane.

**Alexander Polkki** lives in Montreal with his wife and two young children. He holds degrees in Geography and Science and Human Affairs from Concordia University, and has worked as a rafting guide and kayaking instructor on the Rouge River in Quebec. *Vision Quest* is an excerpt from a yet-to-be-published novel entitled *Makerman*, set



in near-future Quebec. This is his first publication.

**Ernie Reimer** lives and writes near Toronto. He is presently working on a novel set in the same world as *Silicon Singularity* and *Cerenkov Blue*.

**Mark Shainblum** lives in Montreal with his wife Andrea Lobel. He co-edited the Aurora Award-winning alternate history anthology *Arrowdreams* (Nuage Editions, 1998) with John Dupuis, and his fiction has appeared in *Would That It Were*, *Playing Solitaire and Other Stories* (Cyber Age Adventures, 2001), and *Island Dreams: Montreal Writers of the Fantastic*, edited by Claude Lalumière (Véhicule Press, 2003). Mark also co-created the *Northguard* and *Angloman* comics series with illustrator Gabriel Morrissette, and currently writes the ongoing webcomic *Canadiana: The New Spirit of Canada* with Sandy Carruthers and Jeff Alward, at [www.sandycarruthers.com/canadiana](http://www.sandycarruthers.com/canadiana). Website: [www.northguard.com/mbs/](http://www.northguard.com/mbs/).

**Hugh A. D. Spencer** was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and currently works as a cultural consultant in Toronto. His recent projects include two radio plays “*21st Century Scientific Romance*” and “*Problem Project*” produced for NPR’s satellite system by Shoestring Radio Theatre in San Francisco. Hugh spends the rest of his time with his children, riding a bicycle along the shoreline of Lake Ontario and illustrating for no one in particular.

**Saint James Harris Wood** is a poet/musician/writer, amateur acrobat and father of three sterling sons: Lowell, Dylan and Zachary. He roamed the world with his band The Saint James Catastrophe, living in Honolulu and Hollywood. Currently residing in a desert penal colony he encourages correspondants to write to S.J. Wood T30027, P.O. Box 4430, Lancaster, CA 93539 USA.

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